RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS
TRISTAN STRONG
PUNCHES A HOLE IN THE SKY
KWAME MBALIA

Copyright © 2019 by Cake Literary
Introduction copyright © 2019 by Rick Riordan
Designed by Tyler Nevins
Jacket art © 2019 by Eric Wilkerson
Jacket design by Tyler Nevins

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of Disney Book Group. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion, 125 West End Avenue, New York, New York 10023.

Created in association with Cake Literary.

978-1-368-05441-6

Follow @ReadRiordan
Visit www.DisneyBooks.com

For the stories untold
and the children who will tell them

# CONTENTS


Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Introduction
1. The Car Ride
2. The Bottle Trees
3. Gum Baby
4. Fight in the Forest
5. Haints and Bone Ships
6. The Raft
7. Iron Monsters 101
8. Fetterlings
9. The Paper Giant
10. The Thicket
11. The Gods of MidPass
12. The Butterfly Whisperer
13. Anansesem
14. Growing Desperate
15. Fuel for the Gods
16. The Warren
17. The Worst Plan Ever
18. The Adinkra
19. Attack!
20. The Bossling
21. Brand Flies
22. Legend of the Bottle Rocket
23. The Golden Crescent
24. Nyame's Palace
25. That Was No Statue
26. Bronzey to the Rescue
27. Nyame's Charm
28. Anansi's Lair

29. Rock Lasers
30. Into Isihlangu
31. The Elders
32. Spirit of the Imbongi
33. Abiyoyo
34. High John
35. A Different Perspective
36. The Man of Fire and Smoke
37. Missing Memories
38. The Story Box
39. Unwelcome Visitors
40. Hullbeasts and Brand Flies
41. The Magic Ax
42. Hoodoo and Confessions
43. The Mmoatia Forest
44. We're All Broken—Story Box, Too
45. Flight of the Midfolk
46. A Dangerous Bargain
47. King Cotton
48. Last Stop
49. Tricking the Trickster
50. Reveal
51. Good-byes and New Lives
About the Author
Keep reading for a sneak peek at The Storm Runner by J.C. Cervantes!
Keep reading for a sneak peek at Dragon Pearl by Yoon Ha Lee!
Keep reading for a sneak peek at Sal & Gabi Break the Universe by Carlos Hernandez!

# THE WORLD BEYOND THE SKY

Don’t get me wrong, Greek myths are great! But you can’t swing a gorgon’s head in any bookstore without hitting at least a dozen Greek-myth-inspired books.

Try finding great adventures based on Western African gods like Nyame or Anansi. Try finding stories about modern kids who encounter African American folk legends like High John, John Henry, and Brer Rabbit. Those books are a lot harder to locate, despite the fact that millions of kids would relate to *those* gods and heroes even more than they would to Hercules and Perseus (sorry, my Greek dudes).

Can you imagine what it would be like if you could find a book that wove the whole brilliant, beautiful tapestry of West African and African American legend into one magical world? A world that made young African American readers think, *Yes! This is MY awesome mythology. This is MY magic world to explore, and these heroic kids are just like me!* A book that left *all* readers thinking, *Wow. Why didn’t I know about these amazing stories sooner?*

Kwame Mbalia has written that book. You are about to discover *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*, and your world will never be the same.

I won’t even try to describe all the incredible adventures facing Tristan Strong in this debut novel. That would spoil the fun! But when Tristan accidentally punches a hole into the sky of the MidPass, the world of African American legends, he starts on the most *epic* of quests. Awaiting him are a malicious haint, relentless iron monsters, creepy bone ships, flying rafts, burning seas, talking animals, ancient gods, and more.

But for all its great fantasy elements, what I love most about this book is its human side. Tristan is struggling with grief after the death of his best friend. He has just lost his first boxing match, thereby disappointing his father’s and grandfather’s hopes for him carrying on the family legacy.

Sentenced to a summer at his grandparents' farm in rural Alabama, this Chicago city kid is struggling to figure out who he wants to be, and whether his parents (and society) will let him be that person. Tristan is tough but tender, smart but cautious, courageous but insecure. He is someone every kid will relate to, and you will immediately want to be his friend.

I'll tell you a secret: I cried while reading *Tristan Strong*. Several times, I just got overwhelmed with happiness, thinking about what this book would have meant to many of my students back when I taught middle school. I was delighted to see old friends like Brer Fox, John Henry, and Gum Baby in such a fresh, modern, page-turning adventure. I felt grateful to Kwame Mbalia for writing it so that new generations of young readers could grow up with Tristan and get to know the rich stories of West Africa and the African Diaspora. In a lifetime full of highlights, I have to say that helping to publish this book is right up there at the top!

I know you will enjoy *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*. I envy you reading it for the first time. As for Tristan's further adventures, the sky's the limit. Wait, no. Tristan punched a hole in the sky. There *are* no limits.

# 1
# THE CAR RIDE

**THERE WAS A RHYTHM IN** my fists.

*Pop pop*

It told a story.

*Pop pop*

Everybody thought they knew the story. They'd seen it before. *He'll get over it. It's a phase. Give him space.* But they only knew fragments. They didn't want to hear the rest….

Oh, you do?

Hmm.

Well, what if I told you that I went to war over my dead best friend's glowing journal? Or that I battled monsters big and small, with powers I didn't know I had, with gods I didn't know existed. Would you believe me?

Nah, you wouldn't. You got your own problems. You don't wanna hear about my struggles. Right?

Oh, you do? Well, I gotta warn you, it's a wild ride, so buckle up, champ.

Let me give you some truth, and I hope it returns back to me.

“Tristan! They’re here.”

*Pop*

Mom’s shout interrupted my groove. I stopped pummeling the small punching bag Dad had installed in my room and loosened the straps on my boxing gloves with my teeth. The gloves fell on the bed, and I dropped down next to them. Eddie’s journal sat on my tiny desk in the opposite corner. Still glowing. Still unopened since his mother had given it to me after the funeral two weeks ago.

My room was so small I could’ve reached out and grabbed the leather book, but that would mean dealing with it, and who deals with their problems by choice?

*Pffft.* Not me.

“Tristan Strong!” my dad yelled from down the hall.

I hated that name.

It made me appear to be something I’m not. My name should’ve been Tristan Coward, or Tristan Failure, or Tristan Fake. Maybe Tristan How-Could-You-Lose-Your-First-Boxing-Match.

Anything but Tristan Strong.

Mom’s footsteps echoed through our tiny apartment, and then soft knocking sounded on my door. “Tristan, baby, did you hear me?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

The door opened and Mom peeked in. She was still wearing the TEAM STRONG T-shirt from last night. I don’t think any of us had gotten much sleep after we came back from my first bout. I stayed up nursing my pride, the only thing I really injured. My little fan club—Dad, Mom, and my grandparents on Dad’s side—had tried to cheer me up, but I could see the disappointment written on everyone’s faces, so I pretended to go to bed while they held whispered discussions into the wee hours of the morning. And now it was dawn, time to get this show on the road.

Mom’s eyes took in the organized chaos of my room and crinkled when they landed on me. She crossed the floor in two steps—avoiding yesterday’s untouched dinner in the process—and sat down on the mattress. “It’s only for a month,” she said, not even playacting that she didn’t know what was wrong.

“I know.”

“It’ll be good for you to get away.”

“I know.”

She rubbed my head, then pulled me into a hug. “The grief counselor said it would be good to get a change of scenery. Some fresh air, work around the farm. Who knows, maybe you’ll find out you were meant to work the land.”

I shrugged. The only thing I was sure of was that I wasn’t meant to be a boxer, despite what Dad and Granddad thought.

I pulled free of Mom’s hug, stood, grabbed my duffel bag, and headed out to start my month of exile.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Mom asked.

I turned and she held Eddie’s journal out to me. Her hand and wrist were bathed in the emerald-green glow that was coming from the cover. But, like everyone else I’d shown the journal to, she didn’t notice any strange light.

Mom mistook my confused frown for apprehension as she slipped the book into my bag. “He wanted you to have it, Tristan. I know it’s tough, but…try to read it when you can, okay?”

I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I nodded and headed to the front door.

The decision to ship me to Granddad and Nana Strong’s farm down in Alabama had been made without my input. Typical. My parents had talked about it a few times before, but after Eddie’s death, and my third school fight in the final two weeks before summer break, well, I guess the time was right.

At least I’d held my own in those school fights. Unlike in the ring last night.

It was just my luck that my grandfather had been there to witness my humiliation.

“You outweighed that other kid by seven pounds!” Granddad had said after the match, in his growling rasp of a voice. “Set the family name back by a decade.”

That’s me—Tristan Disappointment.

Son of Alvin “Wreckin’ Ball” Strong, the best middleweight boxer to come out of Chicago in nearly twenty years. I had Dad’s height and Granddad’s chin, and boxing was supposed to run in my veins. I’d worn Granddad’s old trunks, and Dad had worked my corner. The Strong legacy was expected to take another leap forward during my first match.

Instead, it got knocked flat on its butt. Twice.

"You'll get him next time" was all Dad said, but I could tell he was let down.

And that hurt almost as much as getting punched.

An early summer heat wave greeted me with a blast of humidity as I left the apartment building with my backpack over my shoulder and my duffel bag in hand. Thick gray clouds huddled in the distance, and I added that to the list of totally not ominous things. Glowing journal? Yep. Storm on the horizon? You betcha.

Dad and Granddad stood at the curb while Nana (no one ever called her Grandma, not if you wanted to eat) knitted in the car. Dad towered over his father, but you could see the family resemblance. Deep brown skin like mine, a wide jaw, and a proud stance. I got my hair from Mom's side of the family, thankfully, because both Strong men had identical bald spots peeking through their short afros.

"Get him in the fields, put him to work," Granddad was saying. "That'll put some fire in his belly."

Dad shrugged and said nothing. To be fair, no one did much talking when Granddad was around. That old man could yak a mile a minute.

Nana saw me coming down the stairs, dropped her knitting, and rushed out of the car. "There he is! How you doin' today, baby? Are you sore from last night?"

She gave me a hug that muffled any answer, then shooed Granddad to the side. "Get the boy's bag, Walter. Alvin," she said, addressing my father, "we've got to hit the road before that thunderstorm hits."

Granddad looked me up and down. "Is that all you kids ever wear?" I glanced down. Black Chuck Taylors with gray untied laces. Loose khaki cargo shorts, and an even looser gray hoodie. That hoodie went with me everywhere—it had a picture of a flexed bicep on the back in faded black ink. Call me sentimental, but it's what I always wore when Eddie and I were hanging out. He called it the Tristan Strong uniform of choice, perfect for all occasions.

So yeah, I wear it a lot.

Nana shushed him and pulled me into another hug. "Don't listen to him, Tristan. I can't wait to have you back with us on the farm. You were so little

last time, but them chickens you used to chase still haven't forgotten you! I packed a lunch and even rustled up a new story or two for the ride…."

And so, just like that, with a clap on the shoulder from Dad and a hug from Mom, I was someone else's problem for a month. Good-bye, Chicago, and all your glorious cable TV, internet, and cell phone service. I hardly knew ye.

One thing became very clear during the twelve-hour car ride to Alabama—I was never going to do this again.

Never ever.

Sitting in an enclosed space with Granddad was like wiping your tears with sandpaper. Painful—excruciating, even—and you wondered why you ever thought it was a good idea.

Oh, think I'm playing?

Ten minutes into the trip: "When I was your age, I had a full-time job and I'd already fought in two title fights."

Three hours in: "Oh, you're hungry again? Did you bring some stopping-for-snacks money?"

Six hours in: "Man, I shouldn't have ate those leftover beans for breakfast."

Eight hours in: "Can't believe I drove all this way to see a Strong boy fight so soft. That's your grandmother's side of the family. Ain't no Strong ever look like that in the ring. Why, I remember…"

Anyway, you get it.

By the time we crossed the Alabama state line, I was ready to claw my way into the trunk. I don't know how Nana could just sit there and hum and knit for most of a day, but that's what she did. The Cadillac rumbled down a two-lane highway, kicking up trails of dust and exhaust, a dented rocket ship blasting through time in reverse from the future to a land that Wi-Fi forgot.

I'd put my earbuds in somewhere back in Kentucky, but the battery on my phone had long since run out. I just kept them in so no one would bother me. Nana kept knitting in the passenger seat, and Granddad tapped a finger on the steering wheel, humming along to a song only he could hear. Things seemed more or less calm, except for one thing:

Eddie's journal sat on the seat next to me.

Now, I could've sworn I'd stuffed the book under the clothes in my duffel bag. Which Grandad had put in the trunk. And yet here it was, waiting on me to do something I'd put off since the funeral. The late afternoon sun, occasionally peeking out from behind the storm clouds, made the journal look normal, ordinary. But every so often I'd shade the cover with my hands and peek at it while holding my breath. Yep, still glowing.

*Why not open it*, you might ask, *and see what's inside?*

Well, believe me, it wasn't that simple. Before Eddie's death, the cover of his brown leather journal had always been blank. Now a weird symbol appeared to be stitched into it, like a sun with rays that stretched out to infinity, or a flower with long petals. The same symbol was embossed on a carved wooden charm that dangled from a cord attached to the journal's spine. I'd seen the tassel before—Eddie had used it to mark his spot, or to flick me in the back of the head—but the charm was new.

And, even more weirdly, the trinket pulsed with green light, too. I'd been staring at that book every day for minutes on end, but the glow always stopped me from opening it.

I mean, I knew what was in there anyway. The stories Eddie had jotted down in his goofy, blocky handwriting, from his own silly creations to the fables Nana used to tell us when we were younger, when she'd come up to visit. John Henry, Anansi the Spider, Brer Rabbit's adventures—I'd read them all. Our end-of-semester English project was supposed to be a giant collection of stories from our childhood. Eddie was doing the writing, and I was going to give the oral presentation. Then the accident happened. The counselor Mom took me to every Wednesday had said I should try to finish the writing part, even though school was now over for the year, as a part of healing and other stuff.

(Before you say something slick you might regret, Mr. Richardson is pretty cool for a counselor, you get me? We play *Madden* while we talk, which means I can focus on running up the score on his raggedy Eagles squad and not on being embarrassed about answering questions. It helps… some. If it gets too tough, he knows when to back off, too. So you can keep your *Sensitive* and *Man up* comments to yourself. Chumps.)

To avoid thinking about the haunted journal, I watched the weather outside the car window. The clouds had never let up, even once we were in the Deep South. They just switched from hurling lightning bolts at us to

hurling fat drops of rain that splattered across the windshield like bugs. Everything everywhere was miserable, and that pretty much summed up my life at the moment.

I took off the earbuds and sighed. Nana heard and turned around in her seat to look at me.

"You hungry, sweetie?" she asked.

"No, not really."

"No*, ma'am*." Granddad's deep voice rolled back from the driver's seat. "You answer 'No, ma'am' to your grandmother, understand?"

"Yeah."

Granddad looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"I mean, yes, sir."

He held my eyes a moment longer, then went back to looking at the road.

"Well," Nana continued, turning around and picking up her knitting, "despite what your granddad said earlier"—she gave him a glare—"let me know when you are. Your mama told me you ain't been eating much, and we're gonna fix that. And don't you have some writing to do? That's what your counselor wants you to focus on."

"Boy don't need no counselor," Granddad rumbled. "He needs to work. Ain't no time for moping when horses need feeding and fences need mending."

"Walter!" Nana scolded. "He needs

to—" "I know what he needs—"

I shook my head and stopped paying attention. After spending a day in the car with them, I'd realized that this was what they did. They argued, they laughed, they sang, they argued again, and they knitted. Well, Nana knitted. But they were two sides of the same old coin.

With Granddad, everything was about work. Work, work, work.

Bored? Here's some work.

Finished working? Here's more work.

Need someone to talk to? Obviously, that meant you didn't work hard enough, so you know what? Have a little bit more work.

Nana, on the other hand, sang and hummed when she wasn't talking, which almost never happened, because she always had a new story to share. "Do you know why the owl can't sleep?" she'd say, and off the story would

go, and you'd sit there and listen, just being polite at first, but by the end, you'd be on the edge of your seat.

I smiled. Eddie had loved listening to my grandmother. When she'd come to visit earlier this year, he'd practically followed her around, his journal in hand.

Speaking of which…

My left hand rested on top of it in the seat next to me, and I traced the symbol stitched into the front cover.

"What's that, sweetie?"

I looked up to see Nana peeking back over the seat.

"Hm? I mean, uh, yes…ma'am?"

Granddad nodded, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Nana smiled. "Is that for your writing?"

I hesitated. "Yes, ma'am." I held up the book so she could see it, and her eyes widened at the symbol on the cover.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked. Granddad turned to see what she was looking at, but Nana flapped a hand at him. "Watch the road, Walter."

"From Eddie…" I began, then paused. "I mean, his mom gave it to me. It is…was for us. For our school project. Why? What's wrong?"

Could she see it? Could she tell that the book was glowing, even in the daylight?

Nana pursed her lips. "That symbol. I just haven't seen it in a long time."

"You know what it is?"

"Well…" She glanced at Granddad, who'd tuned us out as soon as we started talking about writing. "It's the spider's web, an old African symbol for creativity and wisdom. It shows how tangled and complicated life can be. But with a little imaginative thinking, we can solve most of our problems and those of others."

"Do you notice anything else about the journal?" I asked her.

Nana laughed, a bright, joyous sound that infected anyone listening. "Is this a test?"

"No, ma'am."

"I don't see nothing but procrastination. Go 'head and give it a try." "Yes, ma'am." I frowned. So Nana could see the symbol, this spiderweb, but not that it was glowing. Well, that didn't make me feel any better.

Granddad smacked the steering wheel. “Y’all need to stop filling his head with that mess about symbols. He needs to stay in the real world, think about what he did wrong last night. The boy need to focus! Boxing ain’t gonna just happen—you got to train your body and your mind.”

“Granddad, I don’t want—”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re not a kid anymore. You’re a Strong, and —”

“Walter,” Nana interrupted, “don’t be so hard on the boy.” “He needs some toughening up—y’all being too soft on him!”

“Now look—” Nana started whisper-lecturing Granddad, who shook his head and grumbled beneath his breath.

I slid down in my seat and tried to block out the argument. I let my thumb trace the cover of the journal, and before my brain could tell me not to, I yanked it into my lap and flipped to a random page. So what if it glowed? It was still a book, and reading it would be better than listening to any more of Granddad’s insults disguised as life lessons. Or reliving that bus accident.

I mean, really, what could go wrong?

# 2
# THE BOTTLE TREES

**TWO FIGURES CROUCHED NEAR THE** base of a giant oak tree. Huge knotted roots sprawled in the center of twisting, creeping shadows. The first figure—a large Black man with arms of mahogany, fists like rocks, and shoulders broader than mountains—went down on one knee in the soft, damp earth. He rested his hand on a smooth log beside him.

"You sure this is necessary, BR?" His voice rumbled like a thousand trains all heading to the same place.

The second figure—a rabbit as big as a kindergartener—twitched nervously and snapped, "Of course I'm sure, John! Hurry up! We need to get this over with." Something clanked in the distance and the rabbit jumped. "Now!"

"Okay, BR, okay," John said. He straightened up…and up…and up, until his silhouette seemed larger than the old tree. "But you need to lend this ole tool some power. I can't do it alone."

"Whatever, just get on with it!"

John picked up the log, except it…wasn't a log. It was a handle—the smooth shaft of a massive hammer. Carvings were etched up and down the wood, and it hummed as giant hands found familiar grooves.

John. With a hammer. No way…. I knew that name. Those *characters.* John Henry, and BR…BR…*Brer Rabbit*? But—

Brer Rabbit put his paws on the huge iron head of the hammer and began to speak in a low tone. His whispers swirled and grew until they sounded like shouts and drumming and stomping feet. The hammer's head —a thick metal block marred with pits and scrapes—began to glow with blazing, red-hot light, and John pressed it against a tangle of roots.

A yawning black hole opened in the ground at the base of the tree.

John bent over and picked a small object off the ground. I couldn't make out what it was. "Go," he said to it, setting it gently into the hole. "Go now and find it. Find it. FIND IT!"

*Click click click*

I yanked my hands off the journal with a gasp. Sweat poured down my face, and I was pressed against the back seat of the Cadillac as we motored along. The storm clouds had finally dissolved, and the sun was almost at the horizon, its orange and red rays pouring through the window.

What was that? A dream? Had I fallen asleep while reading?

Then why had it felt so real? And why was the journal closed on the seat next to me?

"You okay, baby?" Nana asked without turning around.

*Click click click*

Her knitting needles moved furiously. Was it my imagination or was she sweating, too?

"Tristan?"

*Click click click*

But the pressure of that…whatever it was still sat on my chest and locked my mouth. It felt hot and cramped and smothering in the car, like I'd been tucked in with a giant itchy wool blanket, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. I somehow managed to lurch over to the door and open the window to try to get some fresh air.

"Tristan!"

"Boy, put that window up!" Granddad barked from the front. "Lettin' all the dust get in here. Is you out your mind?"

One breath. Two breaths.

"TRISTAN!"

Granddad twisted around, but it was Nana who placed a hand on my knee, and suddenly the pressure was gone. I reluctantly shut the window,

then took a deep breath. The feelings of something pressing down on me had faded to a lurking presence. I could handle that, though it made my neck itch. Nana removed her hand but kept peering at me, a worried look on her face.

"You okay, baby?"

I nodded.

"Answer your grandmother when she—" "Hush,

Walter," Nana scolded. "Mind the road."

I shook my head. "Just…got a little carsick, I think."

Nana watched me as if she suspected that wasn't true, but she didn't pry any further. "Why don't you try to take a nap, dear. Only another hour or so and then we'll be at the farm, and you and Granddad have some work to do before supper." She turned back around, but, just for a second, I could've sworn her eyes glanced at the journal.

*Click click click*

Nana continued knitting, and I looked at the journal on the other end of the seat. After a moment's hesitation, I reached over and shaded it with my hands, already knowing what would happen but checking anyway.

The journal pulsed quicker and stronger, with a bright green glow.

Sometime later, Granddad slowed down and turned onto a bumpy gravel road that climbed up a long hill. "We're here," he said.

I jerked out of a daze. I slipped Eddie's journal into my backpack, then stretched and looked warily out the window. Everything looked…well, it looked like the country.

Yay.

"We are? Where?" I asked.

"Home, sweetie," Nana said, packing up her knitting and turning to smile at me again. "Just in time for me to get dinner started."

"Still about an hour left of sun," Granddad said. "Can at least get part of that old fence fixed."

The car chugged to the top of the hill, and I sat up as the Strong family farm sprawled out to the horizon. A patchwork quilt of green and brown fields surrounded a huge barn and a slightly smaller house. Rows of corn stood at attention as the Cadillac ambled past, like a chariot returning with the land's king and queen. And Nana and Granddad did seem to sit up

straighter as we got closer to the house. Even I could feel it, a tug from something that had been in my family for generations. This was our duchy, our territory. The Strong domain.

My nose pressed against the window, breath fogging the glass, I spotted a stand of trees at the far corner of the farm. They were old, like a section of forest that time had forgotten. Their twisted, giant trunks were bunched together like some sort of crowd…or guards. As I stared at them, the pressure on my chest came back—the feeling from before. Someone…or some*thing* was out there searching.

Searching for *me*.

A flash between the branches caught my eye as we drove past.

"What's that?" I asked.

"What's what, sweetie?"

"In those trees over there. Something's shining."

Granddad shook his head. "More foolishness, that's what it is." "Hush, Walter," Nana said. "That's just the Bottle Tree forest, baby." "The what?" What sort of trees were those—and there was another one! Something flashed again, like light on a mirror or glass.

"Bottle Trees. Oh now, would you look at that? I skipped a stitch. What was I saying? Oh, the Bottle Trees. I could've sworn I've talked up one wall and down the other about this before." She turned around in her seat. "Slaves carried the practice over with them from Africa as a way to capture and dispose of any haints wandering around."

"Haints?" I pressed my nose against the glass and squinted.

"Evil spirits, baby. Lord knows, plenty of those ramblin' about, what with…Well, anyway, don't you worry about it none," Nana continued. "I don't want you messing around over there. Them old trees aren't for playing on. You liable to hurt yourself."

"Need to cut 'em down," Granddad grumbled, but Nana just shooed the words away with her hand.

"Hush, Walter. Now look, Tristan, over there…." She started playing tour guide as we drove up to the house, and I settled back, unable to shake the tingling feeling that something weird was going on.

"Grab that end, boy, and lift. Lift! Stop half-steppin' and put your back into it."

I heaved at the end of a log as Granddad and I slid it into the empty top slot of a pole. We dropped it into place, and I sagged against the repaired fence with a sigh. We'd been working for the last hour, racing the sun to get this section of fence fixed, and I was exhausted. I hadn't even had a chance to drop off my bags. I picked up my backpack, and Eddie's journal nearly fell out of the open compartment. I could've sworn I'd closed the zipper….

Granddad watched me put it away and shook his head. He mopped his forehead with an old rag he kept tucked in the back pocket of his overalls, then put it away and rolled his sleeves down.

"You need to leave that writing nonsense alone, boy. Ain't gonna get you nowhere but confused."

I didn't say anything.

"What you got to write about, anyway? Video games? TV? All that city life got you boys soft. I would've had your dad out here at the break of dawn. How you think he got them heavyweight shoulders? Strongs work, boy."

I squeezed the straps of the backpack until they cut into my palms, but I still didn't say anything.

He spat out the twig he was chewing. "Hmph. Go on, then, and run that extra wire back to the barn. Then clean up for dinner. Hurry up, now—your grandmother's waiting."

I grabbed the spool of wire and stalked down the trail toward the barn. I heard Granddad grumbling to himself, and I tried to ignore it. No matter what I did or where I went, someone always wanted to tell me what I was doing wrong and what I should do different.

*You're pretty big, Tristan. Go play football.*

*Stop reading comic books, Tristan, and go read a real book.*

*Stop…*

I looked up, suddenly aware that the world had gone quiet. I mean, nothing made a sound. No birds, no squirrels, no rustling leaves—even the wind held its breath.

The old stand of trees loomed in front of me.

How long had I been walking? How had I found myself here?

The shadows on the ground deepened and stretched toward me. Thick vines around the trunks seemed to curl like fingers beckoning me closer. They felt desperate, needy. The trees grew larger and larger, and it took me a second to realize that it was because I was walking toward them.

*FIND IT.*

The words boomed and crashed in my head, a thunderstorm of a command, and I froze. They were the same words, the same voice, from my dream in the car. That *had* been a dream, right?

I had reached the edge of the trees. A breeze gusted softly from the dark center of the forest, almost like a breath. It smelled…old. Earthy. Like whatever was in there hadn't been disturbed in years. I didn't want to be the first new intruder.

And yet…

I took a step forward.

"Tristan? Tristaaaan?" Nana's voice broke whatever spell had fallen over me, and I shook my head to clear the cobwebs. My right foot hovered in the air, inches away from entering the shadows. I slowly placed it on the ground, then retreated a few steps. I squinted into the trees. Something was in there, and it wanted me. I could feel it.

"Tristan, dinnertime!" Nana's voice floated out of the sky, riding the breeze in the way only an elder's voice could.

I backed up farther, then turned and ran through the cornfield to the farmhouse.

*No way are you going in those woods,* I told myself. *No way.*

I was wrong.

# 3
# GUM BABY

**WHEN THE ATTACK CAME, I** was half-asleep.

The car trip, the weird dream-that-wasn't-a-dream, working on the farm…By the time I went to bed, my eyelids felt like they weighed a ton. Still, I couldn't quite get to sleep.

It wasn't the darkness, though I wasn't used to nighttime in Alabama. I was used to the almost-night of Chicago—with the glow of streetlights and the flicker of neon signs outside my window.

Here, the complete lack of light made everything seem…different. A flashlight lay on top of the blankets next to me. Not that I'm scared of the dark, you get me, but in case I had to use the bathroom or get a drink of water.

Man, what I wouldn't have given for a couple of streetlights.

It wasn't the silence, though it was also way too quiet. Instead of the comforting sounds of cars and trucks and sirens and people talking on the street, I heard cornstalks rustling in the wind. The window wouldn't close all the way because of the warped wooden frame, and that was good and bad. Good because I didn't feel so pressed in, so enclosed, but bad because of the crickets.

Maaaan, those crickets. Talk about annoying. How could anything so small make that much noise? It was like a million of them surrounded my

window and were screaming the lyrics to the most annoying song you could think of.

Yep, that one you're thinking of right now.

Sucks, doesn't it?

And yet it wasn't the darkness, or the strange sounds, or the unfamiliar house that was keeping me up. The pressure I'd felt on my chest in the car was back, waiting for me to relax. I knew that as soon as I did, it would seize me like an opponent in the ring, clinching my head between its gloves and waiting for the right moment to let go and hit me with that perfect punch. I could feel it. As soon as—

*Thump*

The noise had come from across the room, by the window, like something falling to the floor.

Instantly, I sat up, straining to see in the dark.

Now, if I were back in Chicago, I'd just stuff a pillow over my head to block out the noise, figuring it was a neighbor. Our walls were so thin in that apartment, you could sneeze and people two floors down would say *Bless you!*

But this definitely wasn't Chicago. So, when something went bump, I paid attention. Especially because I was already on edge. Double especially because the sound was followed by sticky, mucky, stepped-on-a-piece-of-tape footsteps.

I stared around the room. There wasn't much furniture—a dresser with my backpack (Eddie's journal still zipped up tight inside), a coatrack, and a chair with my clothes from the day on it. Still, nighttime eeriness turned the shadows of ordinary objects into something twice as creepy. Fingers stretched out of empty space. Shapes combined into creatures that crept toward the bed.

"Who's there?" I whispered.

Nobody answered. The crickets yelled their chorus outside and the wind cackled in the dry cornstalks. But those were normal farm sounds, right?

I don't know what I expected. I took a deep breath and rubbed my eyes. This was silly.

"Stop being a baby, Tristan," I said, embarrassed. "There's nothing here."

Something scraped along the floor, and I swear I heard a voice whisper, "Where is it, where is it, where is it?"

My heart skipped a beat, and I scrambled to the foot of the bed with the flashlight clutched in both of my shaking hands. I clicked it on, but nothing happened.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I muttered, slapping it against the palm of my hand. The switch was stuck. "Why doesn't anything work around here?"

*Click*

The beam flickered on after the fifth or sixth try. "Finally!"

I swept the cone of light around, looking for anything remotely creepy, relaxing a bit each time something strange became familiar. The fingers turned back into a coatrack. The creeping monsters turned back into the chair covered in clothes. The doll baby in the middle of the floor—

—rotated its head when the flashlight beam hit it.

I froze.

The doll looked homemade, like someone had carved it out of wood, painted it a dark molasses brown that hadn't quite dried yet, drawn two black dots for eyes, and glued curly black wool on its head in two afro-puffs. It stood still in the light, almost a foot high, and the two of us stared at each other.

"Okay," I said, then licked my lips. The flashlight turned off again. "Okay. This…is not weird. Right? There's nothing weird about—"

"Who you calling weird?"

I looked around, confused, as I tried to locate the owner of that voice. It sounded strange and high-pitched, like when you breathe in helium from a balloon and your voice gets squeaky.

"Oh, so you don't see Gum Baby now? She invisible now?"

It came from down low. The flashlight came on just in time to catch the doll starting to walk across the floor toward me. Each of her footsteps made a sound like Velcro strips separating.

It—she?—stomped closer, glaring and pointing. "Where is it? You'd better tell Gum Baby, and fast."

*Gum Baby?* No way.

I'd heard that name before. Not the little doll from the stories…? It couldn't be!

In the Anansi tales, Gum Baby was a doll Anansi used to trap an African fairy while he was on a quest. But in the story, the doll remained silent and wore leaves for clothes. This one, on the other hand, had on a

black turtleneck and black pants, but her tiny feet were bare. And what were those stains she was tracking across the floor?

"Hey, Gum Baby's talking to you, big boy." The doll marched across the floor, the serious expression on her face ruined by the plopping sound each of her footsteps made.

"Don't make Gum Baby climb up
there." *Plop plop plop*
"Is Gum Baby talking to a brick
wall?" *Plop plop plop*
"Oh, you're asking for it now."
*Plop plop plop*

She was up the side of the bed and leaving dark stains on the blankets by the time I finally shook myself out of the daze and extended the flashlight like a weapon. "Who—who are you?" I whispered.

The ten-inch-tall doll glared at me, climbed atop my foot, and struck a pose. Both chubby arms spread wide, one foot planted on my big toe, she laughed in her tiny voice.

"Ha-ha-haaaa! You want to know who Gum Baby is? Gum Baby is the reason you sleep with the door locked. Gum Baby is the reason the sun runs away across the sky. Gum Baby is your nightmare, and people whisper her name and tremble around the world. Aha-ha-ha-haaaa!"

*"Shh!"* I said, waving both arms in warning. "You're gonna wake up my grandparents."

Gum Baby cocked her head and looked at me like I'd just slapped her.

"Did you…" she began. "Did you just shush Gum Baby? Didn't you hear the introduction? Being a nightmare and all that, and you locking your door? Did…did that not make sense?"

"No, it made sense, it's just—"

"Should Gum Baby clarify?"

"No, it's fine, I just don't want—"

"Oh good. In that case, GUM BABY WILL GO UPSIDE YOUR HEAD IF YOU EVER THINK ABOUT SHUSHING HER AGAIN!"

Gum Baby scrambled across my lap and flailed at my chest with both sticky hands.

"Let another shush come out of that mouth. Let it! It'll be the last shush your shush-maker will shushify!"

“Okay, okay!” I batted away the irritating blows, ducking and dodging more of that sticky stuff. “Stop it, that tickles, and you’re getting…stuff all over the bed.”

Gum Baby wrestled with my shirt one more time, then stood on my lap, both hands on her hips. I wiped a glob of goop off my cheek and made a face. What were Granddad and Nana gonna say about the mess in the morning?

“That’s better. Now, where is it?” Gum Baby folded her tiny arms across her chest.

“Where’s what?”

“Don’t play dumber. You know what.”

“No, I—Look, I don’t know who you are…. Well, I think you’re…but that wouldn’t make sense, those were just stories, and…Can you just tell me why you’re here?”

I meant why was she alive and not just a fable, but Gum Baby misunderstood. She glared at me for a second. “Gum Baby’s on a mission, Bumbletongue. Where is the sign? Gum Baby knows it’s glowing around here somewhere.”

I tried to form words, to come up with some sort of answer to her questions, but the whole situation was too unreal. It was like I was being interrogated by a twelve-dollar toy from the bargain bin. Eddie would never have believed this. In fact, this was just the sort of story Eddie would—

Wait a minute.

*Glowing around here…*

Could it be?

My eyes flicked to the backpack on the dresser—only for a second, but Gum Baby saw, and an evil smirk crossed her face. Quick as a flash, she flung more goop in my face.

“Think fast!”

“Gah!” I yelped.

While I pawed the stuff out of my eyes, the blankets shifted and I felt her run to the end of the bed and leap off. By the time I could pry my eyes open, the stupid little thing was nowhere to be seen. A line of dark globs led to the dresser. I kicked off the blankets and ran over, looking around wildly.

The backpack—with Eddie’s journal—was gone.

I spun around and aimed the flashlight at the floor. Gum Baby had disappeared. I looked under the bed—nothing.

Then I heard sticky footsteps sneaking to the wall behind me.

I twisted around just in time to see Gum Baby leap out the window, fleeing into the night with my pack, green light escaping from the slightly open zipper.

"Get back here!" I whisper-shouted as I ran to the window.

Gum Baby sprinted on her stubby little legs along the dirt path outside, around the Cadillac, and up the hill leading to the cornfield. Seconds later, I couldn't spot her anymore.

I slowly sank to the floor, hugged my knees to my chest, and closed my eyes.

What had just happened? This was a nightmare. That was it—my dream in the car must've never ended. This couldn't be real. I couldn't have lost the only thing I had to remind me of Eddie. And to a sticky toy at that!

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My hands shook, and I pressed my palms against the floor to keep them still—right into a puddle of something soft and sticky.

What *was* that stuff? Honey?

Strands of whatever it was stretched and folded like taffy as I rubbed it between my fingers. It smelled sweet, but not exactly like honey. Something familiar, though. More of it dotted the floor, and I looked at the wall behind me. Sure enough, little dark splotches went all the way to the windowsill.

A trail!

I clenched my fists, then looked at the corner of the dresser where the backpack had been. That journal held Eddie's humor, his silly jokes, his stories, his dreams. It was everything.

Maybe there was a chance I could get it back.

I grabbed the flashlight, tugged on my hoodie and cargo shorts, and stepped into my sneakers. The window creaked as I eased it up, and the smell of horses and other farm odors hit me, right before the wind issued a warning.

*Stay in bed.*

I ignored it.

I squeezed through the window and dropped to the porch. For a moment I hesitated. The darkness, the whispering wind, the rustling cornstalks— they all tried to change my mind.

*Go back inside.*

*This ain't for you.*

*No telling what might happen to a city boy around here this time of night.*

I was about to cave in to the fear and go hide in my bed, when the flashlight beam landed on a small patch of sticky residue on the edge of the wraparound porch. And then one on the grass a few feet away. And another. And another.

I gripped the flashlight so hard it hurt. The wind whistled louder, rattling the corn, but I gritted my teeth and shook my head. “You don’t scare me. I’m getting that journal back. Strongs keep punching, you get me?”

I felt silly saying it, but Dad’s mantra gave me courage. Before I could think twice, I plunged off the porch and into the night.

# 4
# FIGHT IN THE FOREST

**MY SNEAKERS PADDED ON THE** dirt path as I ran up the trail. Stars twinkled above, but with no moon, I could barely see where I was going. And the sounds…It seemed like the night was alive…and angry. Animals and birds and more dang crickets all wanted a piece of this Chicago boy who was invading their turf. The only thing keeping me going was the sound of something scurrying through the cornfield on my right. If I moved fast enough, I could cut off the tiny thief. From the sound of Gum Baby's complaining, she was facing more obstacles than I was.

"Who plants corn in the middle of a field? Ooh, child, if Gum Baby had the time, she would show this world a thing or two. Who's that? Move along, bird! This ain't a party. Gum Baby said move! Hey, let go of that…. Let go! So you want some of this? Sap attack!"

A flurry of feathers erupted out of the cornfield, and a crow squawked and flapped awkwardly away.

*Sap*…So *that's* what the sticky stuff was. In the stories, Anansi covered the doll in the sap of gum trees. This little thief seemed to produce it like Granddad did sweat. And, yes, neither image is pretty. Sticky, sweaty sap missiles. Lovely.

I put on a burst of speed and rounded the bend just in time to see Gum Baby scurry across the road, leaves and feathers stuck to her back, and

plunge into the trees on the opposite side.

"Hey!" I called.

Gum Baby gave me a glance, then took off sprinting. "You again? Well, you're too late—Gum Baby's like the wind!"

I lunged forward, but she and my backpack disappeared into the darkness. I skidded to a stop at the edge of the road and swallowed. The creepy old Bottle Tree forest stood in front of me, its canopy creating the illusion of a tunnel. In the beam of my flashlight, the gnarled trunks looked like faces. Sentinels on watch, they eyed me suspiciously.

I gulped.

The wind blew, cackling through the leaves.

*Told ya, boy. You don't want this.*

I backed up a step, then stopped. A soft green light bobbed deep in the woods.

Eddie's journal. I clenched my fists. I had to get it back.

The wind gusted stronger, but I made a rude hand gesture at it. "You don't scare me," I whispered. One deep breath, then another, and I ran headlong into the forest.

The wind howled, and branches scratched and clawed my face, but I pressed on. Trees creaked and groaned, and roots tangled my feet, but still I moved forward. It grew harder and harder to run, with the branches and knots of the trees forcing me to scoot and sidestep, but eventually I forced my way through and stumbled into a clearing.

I thought I was ready for anything.

Wrong. WRONG.

Gum Baby stood in front of the weirdest tree I'd ever seen. It was only a few feet tall, maybe coming up to my chin, but its arms sprawled out straight as a ruler in all directions. Bottles of every shape and size—but all a glimmering shade of blue—were stuck on the ends of the branches.

When the wind gusted, the bottles moaned. Sweat beaded on my forehead as that pressure from earlier in the day smothered me like a wet blanket. My arms and legs felt like the heavy bags from Dad's gym, and moving them took more effort than I ever imagined possible. I was so distracted by the dread curling around me I didn't notice that the Bottle Tree was now leaning in my direction. A flash of blue alerted me.

Deep inside the largest bottle on the tree, up near the tippy-top, something moved. It shifted like dirty oil moving through water, and the

only thing I wanted to do at that moment was run screaming back to the house.

"You don't know when you're beat, do you?"

Gum Baby's squeaky voice grabbed my attention. She leaned against the Bottle Tree, one hand clutching the backpack, the other pushed *inside* the trunk.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"Who you shouting at, boy? If Gum Baby had more time, she'd wear out that hide of yours, up one end and down the other. But you ain't worth the crusty sap on the bottom of Gum Baby's foot, so you get off with a warning."

"Give me back my stuff!" I said, forcing myself to move closer to her and the tree. The branch holding the creepy large bottle at the top of the tree seemed to lean over more and more.

She laughed. "Just go home, fool! Enjoy life's little pleasures, like breathing and eating solid food." She turned and stepped farther into the trunk. One strap of the backpack was now gone, heading to wherever that freaky little tree led. Cold anger made me clench my teeth, ignore the sense of evil growing in the forest, and focus on getting back Eddie's journal.

"Look, you…you…doll baby! Gimme back that bag, or I'll—" Gum Baby froze. She turned slowly toward me and tilted her head. "What'd you say?"

"Give me back—"

"No, hush, before that. What'd you call me?"

I licked my lips. "Uh…nothing. I just wanted my friend's—"

"Oh no, it wasn't nothing. It can't be nothing now. You said it. You let the words come out of your mouth, and you need to stand by them. For as long as you have legs to stand on, anyway. So come on, big boy—what'd you say? Huh? WHAT'D YOU SAY?"

The wind died down and the Bottle Tree stood up straight again, as if the forest wanted to hear my answer. I looked around, suddenly wishing for a witness, or a shield. "Um, I just, I mean, I may have said, or called you, a doll—"

Gum Baby leaped toward me with a murderous scream.

"CALL GUM BABY A DOLL, WILL YOU? SAP ATTACK! TWO SAP ATTACKS! GUM BABY HOPES YOUR HANDS STICK TO YOUR FACE FOREVER AND YOU HAVE TO EAT WITH YOUR ELBOWS.

TRIPLE SAP ATTACK, YOU…YOU…GIANT TURTLE-FACED THISTLE-HEAD!”

“Ow, stop it!” I fell backward as she scrambled up my legs and onto my chest. She unleashed a miniature onslaught, and it took everything I had to shield myself as her tiny fists and feet pummeled me. Finally, I batted Gum Baby away with my hand, but she got up and ran at me again. I grabbed one strap of the pack, ignoring the sticky residue squelching under my hands, and pulled it out of the tree, stumbling backward. Gum Baby hung on to the other strap, and the weirdest game of tug-of-war ensued in the middle of the clearing. “Let go!”

“*You* let go! Gum Baby’s on a mission.” “A mission? What mission?”

“None of your business, fool!”

I swung the backpack around, trying to dislodge the thief, but Gum Baby held on with grim determination. I slammed it into the ground, whirled it over my head, but no matter what I did, I couldn’t dislodge her. I let a growl of frustration escape and ran toward the Bottle Tree.

Gum Baby flapped behind me. “Oh, you’re running away now? You better! Gum Baby was just about to—Hey, what’re you doing?”

I swung the backpack in a circle and slammed it—and Gum Baby— against the trunk. She yelped, then wrapped herself even more tightly around the strap.

“Wait, stop it, fool! You’ll damage the tree!”

“I don’t care,” I growled. “Give me my backpack!” I whipped it into the tree again.

The bottles shook and clinked together, echoing like haunted wind chimes. I began to whip around again for an even heavier slam.

“No, you idiot, you’re fixing to get us both—”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” I shouted. I grabbed a handful of the backpack, balled my fist around the strap, and punched the Bottle Tree with all my might.

*Crack*

The punch smashed into the large blue bottle near the top, shattering the glass. The backpack ripped, Eddie’s journal tumbled out, and bright green light flared in a blinding flash.

Heat.

Wind.

Everything blasted me at once.

But beneath it all, I heard a sinister laugh. The pressure on my shoulders suddenly disappeared. Out the corner of my eye, I saw a shadowy shape ooze from what was left of the broken bottle on the ground and creep along the grass. The wind howled in agony, the forest roared in pain, and a chasm ripped open at the foot of the tree. A giant sucking sound filled the clearing, like air rushing toward a hole.

The fissure split and grew, like those scenes in disaster movies when an earthquake cracks the streets apart and chases the hero.

I tried to get away, but the tear in the earth widened to reveal a swirling coal-red tunnel of fire. It burned like a thousand suns, and at its edge, something glowed a soft green.

I sucked in a breath.

Eddie's journal teetered there precariously.

"No!" I shouted, just as Gum Baby yelled, "The stories!"

Gum Baby leaped from the backpack to the book.

Without thinking, I dove for it, too, desperate to rescue Eddie's journal from the flames and from Gum Baby.

My fingertips grazed the cover just as Gum Baby plopped a sticky hand on it. I started to yell at her, but then I realized, too late, that we were falling.

We'd tumbled into the glowing slash in the ground. We plummeted without slowing one bit, spinning and twisting at dizzying speeds. It was like a sink of burning anger, and we were swirling down the drain.

I tried to scream, but the forest's pained roar drowned me out. Gum Baby clutched my wrist tight as we fell for what seemed like forever, dropping like stones through the whirlpool of fire.

# 5
# HAINTS AND BONE SHIPS

**PAIN.**

Confusion.

Fear.

Darkness.

And then, echoing all around me, a voice: “Hey now, hey now…I gotcha, big man, I gotcha.”

A match was struck, and a lantern flared to life overhead. The soft yellow glow didn’t eliminate the shadows so much as it outlined them. I was lying in the middle of a rustic room, like the inside of a cabin or a wooden shed. Who was speaking? I couldn’t make out much except for the shadows and that lantern.

Water dripped from the ceiling, and the smell of old swamp and rotting vegetation filled the air. My eyes started to tear up, and I coughed as the vapors got into my nose and lungs.

“Easy now, Tristan. That is your name,

right?” “W-who’s that?” I asked in mid-cough.

“Aw shoot, big man, I’m nobody. Just didn’t want you to fall to your death, is all. I saved you, just like you saved me.”

My chest burned, but I stood up and wiped the tears from my eyes. “Where are you?”

One shadow detached from the rest, but it had no shape. It oozed up, and I shuddered as a familiar pressure gathered around my shoulder blades. This was the thing from the Bottle Tree forest, from the broken bottle. I'd recognize that feeling of despair anywhere.

"I saved you?" I asked.

"You did, Tristan, so I had to repay the favor. I've been waiting for you. You got something I need, and if we work together—shoot, this whole world can be ours. They won't know what hit 'em. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Why don't you hand me that book of yours and we can get started."

"Book?" I shook my head, then froze. Eddie's journal. The fight. Gum Baby. I whirled around, looking for the little terror and my backpack, but all I saw was darkness.

"Yes. The book." The voice went from smooth to impatient. "Where is it?"

"I—I don't know." I dropped my head into my hands. "I lost it. I need to find it."

A growl echoed around the room before it faded to a soft purr. "Yeeeeah. You do that. I need that book, Tristan, so when you find it, you bring it to me, and we can get this party started, you hear? Don't you tell a soul, boy, and don't dally…. Naw, don't you try and play me one bit. 'Cause I'll know."

Wind whistled in my ear, and my clothes fluttered as if a huge gust was blowing through.

"Wait, where am I? Who are you?"

Why was everyone after Eddie's journal? Why did this…*thing* need it so badly?

"We saved each other, so we're practically kinfolk." The voice began to disappear in the howling wind, and I could barely hear the final words. "Just call me Uncle C."

"Tristan! Tristaaaan!"

I was falling again. Whatever that place was, whoever that voice was, it all got driven to the back of my mind when I opened my eyes to a nightmare.

Gum Baby's back was stuck to my wrist as if it were glued there as we continued to tumble down the fiery tunnel. Luckily she was holding on to

Eddie's glowing green journal for dear life. Swirling below us was a dark, boiling sea, so horrifying that even my screams started screaming. Wind whipped my cheeks and pulled tears from my eyes. I squeezed them shut. Whatever was going to happen next would happen—I didn't need to see it.

*Splash!*

The impact drove the breath from my lungs. My skin prickled. The water temperature bubbled a few degrees above comfortable—not scalding as I'd feared, but hot enough to scare me. Panicking, I opened my mouth to cry out in surprise, and water surged inside. I swallowed by accident and it burned on the way down. *Swim!* I told myself. *Swim, Tristan, or you're done for.*

I forced my eyes open and tried to figure out which direction was up. Blurry light flickered in the distance. My legs kicked me toward it on their own, my lungs screaming for air, and I clawed my way to what I hoped was the surface. Shadowy shapes streaked past, and—oh, man—something slimy brushed my ankle.

I'd had it by that point. *This* was how Tristan Strong was going to meet his end? In a giant dirty hot tub?

Just when I thought I couldn't go any farther and my chest felt like it was going to explode, my head broke the surface. I coughed and spluttered.

"Blech!"

My mouth tasted like old pennies and warm spoiled milk. Yeah…think about that flavor.

"Gum Baby?" I called out hoarsely. I kicked and paddled, doing my best to tread water as I sucked down air, and looked around in confusion. "Gum Baby, where…?"

The question died on my tongue as I took in my surroundings.

Fires burned on the sea. Not little fires, either, but massive walls of flame that licked high into the air. The current carried infernos everywhere, and their bright blazes turned the water into swirling oranges and reds. Steam hissed up from the surface and collected into clouds a few feet above my head. Through an occasional break in the mist I could see that it was still nighttime. And there, high above, the fiery tunnel we'd fallen through scarred the sky.

I looked down. Lights twinkled on and off in the depths, and at first I thought it was the reflection of the stars. Then I saw a long shadow pass underneath me—a leviathan somehow lit from beneath—and I gulped.

Where the heck had we landed?

“Bumbletongue!” The cry came from behind me. “Help! Gum Baby can’t sw—*glublublub*. Gum Baby can’t swim!”

I tore my eyes away from the shape below and whipped my head around. Sure enough, there was the little thief, flailing in the water a short distance away. I paddled over, a million questions fighting to be first out my mouth.

Gum Baby floated on her back, hugging the journal tightly like a life preserver. Her little legs kicked helplessly in the air, and a tiny fire burned on one foot. I splashed her to douse the flame, then grabbed the journal and lifted it—with Gum Baby still attached—out of the water with one hand. I hoped it wasn’t ruined. (The book, not the doll. She could float there forever for all I cared.)

“About time!” Gum Baby, now hanging on from below, coughed and glared at me. “What took you so long? Gum Baby ain’t a fish. Come on, we have to—”

“Where are we?” I asked, cutting her off.

“What?”

“Where are we? What happened? Did you see a shadow thing, with the voice and the smells, before we splashed down? Why am I floating in an ocean of fire, and why are there stars under us, and what happened to my backpack?”

Gum Baby waved one arm and a wet glob of sap plopped into the sea. “*Shh.* Gum Baby don’t know what you talking about half the time, and the other half she ain’t got the patience. No time to answer all those questions. Well, maybe there is, but you drain me. Like a straw. Here you come, and— *fwoop!*—all my energy is gone.”

I growled and shook the journal. She nearly lost her grip.

“Okay, okay! Stop messing around. Gum Baby don’t feel so good.”

More sap plopped down as if to prove her point. As I continued to tread water with only one arm, I gave thanks for Dad’s swim training. He used to make me do laps in the local community center pool when it was too cold outside to go running.

I tilted my head, trying to get water out of my ears, and for a second I thought I heard a drumbeat and clapping. But that was silly. I turned back to my sticky little companion.

“Where. Are. We?” I asked again through gritted teeth.

"*Shh.* Gum Baby's trying to tell you, now ain't the time for talking. If they hear us, we're in trouble."

"*They?* Who's they?"

Just then, a splash sounded in the distance, and Gum Baby shushed me again. She stared into the fire and fog, her wet black curls plastered to her carved wooden head. After a second, she relaxed.

"Can't be so loud," she muttered.

I didn't know if she was talking to me or to herself, but either way, it wasn't reassuring. I blinked salt out of my eyes and spat out another mouthful of sour seawater. *I'm going to need eight bottles of mouthwash after this*, I thought.

"What is this place?" I asked. "Some sort of underground salt lake? I didn't think Alabama had these."

"What? No." Gum Baby looked surprised, as if I should know. "This ain't no Alabama, wherever that is."

"Maybe Mississippi, then?"

"I don't know no Mrs. Ippy, and you can tell her Gum Baby said that." "No, that's not—"

"Look, enough with the flappy-lip jibjab. We need to hurry before—"

There was another splash, then another that sounded even closer, and Gum Baby froze up.

"They're coming," she whispered.

"Who is *they*?!"

A rippling sound echoed across the water. We both turned to see a column of floating fire curving through the water toward us, and with every second it picked up speed. The ripples it made turned into flame-capped waves as a long, gnarled shape sliced up through the surface and into the air.

My eyes nearly fell out.

"Holy—"

"Ship!" Gum Baby screamed.

A vessel unlike any I'd seen before rose from the deep. Its hull was two giant white hands cupped together, the fingertips touching at the prow. Knobby knuckles poked out along the side. It had no sail, just a single bare mast that jutted up mid-ship, a daggerlike tower that cut through the curtains of steam. No one could be seen on deck. It was just a weird hand-

ship the size of a yacht, sailing without a captain, roaring across a burning sea toward us.

Oh, and it wasn't made of painted wood, like I'd thought.

"Those are bones!" I yelled at Gum Baby.

"Stop shouting and swim, fool!"

The spooky ship creaked as it listed to one side, turning to sweep down on us. Horrible sounds floated to us across the waves: a thousand sufferers moaning and crying out. Desperate. Infuriated. Scared. Hungry. I didn't know who—or what—was making the noise, but I wasn't planning on sticking around to find out.

I shivered despite the hot water, floundering with one arm, the other supporting Eddie's journal and Gum Baby. "I can't swim *and* hold you," I said.

"Hand over the stories and put Gum Baby on your back.

Now!" "On my back? I'm not—"

"Put Gum Baby on your back, Bumbletongue! Stop chitchattin' and move it!"

I swallowed several choice angry words and slipped Gum Baby onto my shoulders. I didn't trust her with Eddie's journal, but the ship was barreling toward us and I needed both hands free.

"You lose that book," I said, "or run away with it again, and I'll turn you into an incense holder."

Gum Baby patted the top of my head. "*Shh,* fishy. Just swim toward the cloud of steam when Gum Baby says go. These things don't turn around easy, so even your dusty tail should be able to escape."

I hated that doll. I hated it with a burning passion.

"Ready…"

The ship moaned at us. It was a white and sharp predator trailing fountains of fire behind it.

"Steady…"

I licked my lips. "Gum Baby, it's nearly—"

She smacked the back of my head. "Hush, fool! We've got one shot at this. Bone ships look scary, but you can avoid them easy enough if you know how."

Oh great, they were even called *bone ships*. That didn't make things better.

Just when it seemed like we were moments away from being crushed, just when the front of the bone ship—no way!—groaned open, the fingertips lowering to SCOOP US UP…Gum Baby shouted in my ear, “Go, go, go!”

My body responded to the command before I could protest. Dad used to shout the same thing at me from the side of the pool when I did my laps. I gave a mighty kick, my legs scissoring through the water, and I darted forward. I didn’t look behind me, but I knew the ship was close. The surge it was creating nearly pulled me under. I fought it, my arms flashing in and out of the water like Dad had taught me, and then the ship passed us by. We were safe.

“Go there!” Gum Baby screamed, pointing.

A thick gray-white cloud of steam hovered ahead. It drifted over a calm spot just beyond the waves, and, thankfully, no fires were burning nearby. I dug deep for a bit more energy and kicked forward. Another moan echoed over the water, taking my mind off how heavy my arms felt. Exhausted and free beats resting in the bowels of a skeleton ship, you get me?

Gum Baby patted my head as we approached.

“Good fishy. Scoot on in there and wait until—”

A bellowing moan—even louder, deeper, and scarier than the first— sounded right in front of us. I could feel it through the water, in my chest, and I threw my arms out and floated to a stop.

Gum Baby squeaked, and something rolled down my back. “Please tell me that was sap,” I whispered, treading water. “Um…okay.”

I couldn’t even get angry. I was too tired. Too drained. Too afraid that…

Another bone ship lunged out of the thick cloud of steam in front of us. Cloudy wisps clung to it like spiderwebs. Even though it was about the same size as the first, its horrific shape made it seem larger.

It was the jawbone of some enormous reptile. Long and thin and pale, it cut through the sea like a powerboat. Strands of something I didn’t want to look at too closely trailed from between its enormous teeth. Burning seawater streamed down its sides, and it let loose a soul-crushing bellow as it began to pick up speed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw yet another streak of white in the water. A third ship surfaced from beneath, like a submarine from a horror

show. This bone ship looked like a rib cage, curved bones curling up as it erupted out of the sea.

The first ship, Bone Hands, circled around behind us.

We were trapped.

“Gum Baby, where do I go? What do I

do?” Silence.

I could feel Gum Baby lying between my shoulder blades,

shivering. “Gum Baby, get up! What do I do? Where am I going?”

The three ships closed in. Rib Cage rattled as it drew near. Jawbone continued to blast us with that deep groaning bellow. I turned to see the Hands open again, the hungry maw between the fingertips dark and foul. A chorus of moans tortured my ears while a gust of hot, rotten air clawed up my nostrils.

“Gum Baby, what do—?”

A high-pitched whistle split the night.

Gum Baby leaped to her feet and scrambled to the top of my head. “Gum Baby don’t believe it!” she said, her voice excited.

“What?”

“We’re saved!”

“Saved? How?”

But she didn’t answer. Instead, she jumped up and down on my head and started shouting at the top of her tiny little lungs. I didn’t know doll babies *had* lungs.

“HERE!” Her shrill voice—and her tiny feet beating on my skull— made me wince. “WE’RE DOWN HERE!”

Nothing happened.

The bone ships surged closer, hemming us in, and I looked around wildly for some way to escape. I could dive beneath them, but Eddie’s journal (and yes, I guess, the annoying, sticky little creature holding it) would be hard to hold on to while I swam. Besides, my legs felt like anchors by then, and those ships had come from beneath the sea—there was no telling how many more of them lurked below. I couldn’t avoid them for much longer.

The Hands swept forward, seconds away from funneling me inside….

Something splashed down into the water next to me.

“Grab the rope!”

The voice—a girl's—came out of the air above us. A giant wooden raft the size of a boxing ring floated in the night sky, a rope dangling over its edge. A hysterical chuckle bubbled in my chest. Of course. A flying raft. Why didn't I think of that?

"Grab it, grab it!" Gum Baby shouted, and I lunged for the thick line. I felt the doll crawl into my soaking-wet hood, and not a moment too soon. The rope grew taut, and whoever was on the raft pulled us up. The razor-sharp mast of the Hands barely missed slicing the sole of my foot open, and then we were clear, soaring into the night.

# 6
# THE RAFT

**THE FIRST THING I SAW** when I rolled onto the raft was a carved staff. Its golden tip, a face twisted into a snarl, stared down at me.

"Who are you?" the staff's owner demanded.

I stared at the tip, which moved from side to side hypnotically, like a cobra getting ready to strike. "Uhh…"

"I won't ask again. Who are you?"

"My name is Tristan," I said. "Tristan Strong."

"Tristan Strong. Hmph. Well, Tristan Strong, what are you doing flopping about in the Burning Sea? You could've dragged us all down into a right nasty time trying to rescue you."

"Sorry."

"Sorry don't feed the hungry." The staff lowered, though, and I finally snapped out of my trance and glimpsed who was wielding it.

A short round girl with honey-brown skin and gold snake bangles curling up her arm glared at me. She looked my age, maybe a year older. Her hair was pulled back in two thick braids that disappeared behind her head, and she wore a sleeveless gold tank top, black pants with gold trim that stopped mid-calf, and brown sandals with beaded straps that tied around her ankles.

Someone—no, several someones—huddled behind her at the other end of the raft. A group of about a dozen clustered together, all wearing long,

dingy gray cloaks with hoods that hid their faces. They stood among rumpled leather sacks, and they clung desperately to rope handrails on the sides of the raft. My eyes shifted between them and the girl.

"Well, get up," she ordered.

I stood slowly. My legs jiggled like wet spaghetti, and I could barely lift my arms. *Tired* didn't even begin to describe it. It felt like everything, from Gum Baby to the Bottle Tree to the weird shadow man to the Burning Sea to the bone ships, was piled up in a wobbly tower in my mind. Any second now, it would all come tumbling down and bury me in confusion.

Sometimes you just have to fight off your brain.

"Who are you?" I asked the girl as I began to pull up the rope that had saved me, coiling it around one arm. "Where did you all come from?"

"Why are you so nosy?" she asked.

"Sorry, I—"

"Never mind, we don't have time for this. Just be quiet before I throw you back."

I obeyed.

One of the cloaked figures in the rear shifted. "Ayanna, we must go."

The girl huffed and turned. As she walked by, I felt Gum Baby jerk up in my hood. "Ayanna? Is…is that you? How…? Why…? You're so big!"

"Gum Baby!" Ayanna dropped to her knees and swept the doll out of my hoodie and into a huge hug. "How did you…? Where have you been? We looked everywhere for you. We were worried sick. You were supposed to come right back!"

"Gum Baby only meant to stay for a few hours, but Bumbletongue here was selfish and insisted on tagging along. And then there was the whole fight over this book"—she held up the waterlogged journal—"and—"

"A few hours?" Ayanna held Gum Baby at arm's length and looked at her. "Gum Baby, you've been gone for a year. What—?"

"Ayanna! Bone ships!" The tallest passenger leaned over the side of the raft and pointed to the Burning Sea beneath us. "There!" he called in a pained yip. Others craned to see, but I stared at the one who had called the warning.

I must have been tired. Half-asleep, even. His arm looked like it was… covered in fur.

But there was no time to linger on that. Ayanna put Gum Baby down, and, with a promise to talk later, dashed to the rear and jammed her staff

into a knothole.

"Hold tight!" she called.

Everyone grabbed the ropes, and my eyes grew wide.

"Wait—"

But it was too late. With a thrust of Ayanna's stick, the raft jerked forward and I toppled head over heels, landing in a pile of cloth. *What is propelling this thing?*

"Oomph!" Someone pushed me off them. "Watch it!"

"Sorry," I muttered, but when I turned to meet the eyes beneath the hood, I froze. They glinted yellow. And was that a…snout?

"What the—?"

But the person—it *had* to be a person—turned away as a bright orange flash seared the night sky.

Ayanna blanched. "Why are there so many ships?" she whispered.

I looked at her face, swallowed, then scooted back and peeked over the edge of the raft.

"Sweet peaches," I said under my breath.

Bone ships swarmed beneath us like sharks smelling blood. The Hands, the Ribs, the Jawbone—they were all there, but there were more, too. They fought and jostled to get right underneath the raft, as if at any moment we'd tumble out of the air. The sea flared with light every time one ship crashed into another, and the impact sounded like a crack of thunder. Flames shot up like lava from an erupting volcano, and more than one scream echoed around me. Ayanna tried to swerve and keep going forward, but another blast nearly singed the front of the raft.

"Toss some of those supply bundles overboard," Ayanna instructed someone. "We have to get higher. I'm cutting off the search and heading home." It looked like the words pained her as she turned the raft around. The search? What were they searching for? Not the journal… Gum Baby was still holding it under her arm as she clung to the handrail,

looking around in confusion. "Gum Baby was gone a whole year?" she muttered to herself. "That ain't right."

I leaned over to look down at the violent sea, then sat back in a hurry and prayed we would go even faster. "Gum Baby, how long did it take you to get from…this place to my grandparents' farm? Did it take months?"

"No! Seconds—minutes, maybe. Gum Baby told you she move like the wind." She rubbed her face in confusion. "It don't make sense."

“Well, where are we going now?”

“Back,” she said, her squeaky voice low and sad. “Back to the Thicket.” “Where’s that?”

Gum Baby pointed to a smoky white line in the distance, barely visible beyond the flames on the water. From here it looked like a mere smear on the horizon.

I bit my lip. “It’s too far away,” I said. “The ships will get us before—” Gum Baby shook her head. “Ayanna can make it.”

“I hope you’re right,” a low voice behind us muttered.

All the passengers held each other as Ayanna coaxed and pleaded with the raft for more speed. The bone ships moved slowly, but others kept popping out of the deep on either side below us. Just when it looked like we’d left some pursuers behind, another three or four would lurch out of the water like the unearthed remains of prehistoric monsters. Or sea zombies. Yeah, sea zombies. They moaned with hunger and joined the chase.

Finally, after the last supply bag went over the side, and just when I was wondering how far a drop it was to the ocean, we began to pick up speed. The bone ships drifted farther and farther behind us, until eventually they disappeared into the flames. Several passengers exhaled in relief, but my muscles wouldn’t relax, and I started to shiver.

“You cold?” Ayanna asked. “We have blankets—”

“No, I’m good.” I didn’t want to tell her the real reason I was shaking. I don’t do heights. Especially not on a flying raft with no seat belts and flimsy ropes for railings. But it felt silly complaining about that after nearly being swallowed by an oversize science-class skeleton.

We kept gliding until the line of smoky white became a cloudy smudge, then a curtain of fog. Finally, the vague outline of a coast appeared. It stretched far and curved slightly in the distance, disappearing into mist.

Once everybody had settled down, and a few passengers even began to chat among themselves, I scooted closer to Gum Baby and leaned over. “Those ships back there…What…? How—?” I broke off, trying to get my words together and my shivering under control. “What were those things?”

Gum Baby picked at a smear of sap on her pants. “Everybody just calls them bone ships.”

“But what *are* they?”

“Scavengers,” Ayanna broke in. “Vultures. Miss—uh, someone I know calls them echoes of a nightmare from another realm. But still, they’re more

of a nuisance than a real danger. At least they used to be. I've seen them group up before, but never like that."

"But the sounds. The people I heard moaning—"

"Those are just echoes. Nothing is alive on those things, trust me. You just heard memories from a different time, a bad time."

"Memories of what?"

But she waved me off. "Not now. We're almost there."

The raft slowed and started to drift lower and lower. As we sank through wispy white clouds, leafless dead trees appeared, leaning out of the water like spears. Ayanna beckoned us all close. "Gather whatever you have left. We've made it to the shallows—we can wade to shore from here. I'd rather land now than try to navigate through that mist and those trees. Leave what you can't carry, or anything that would bog you down. Head for the trees, follow the signs, and we'll be back in the Thicket before you know it."

I started moving to the back of the raft to get out of everyone else's way, trying not to rock it. Ayanna looked at me, then at Gum Baby, who'd climbed up on my shoulder, and shook her head. "I don't know what y'all did, or where you came from, boy, but you might as well come with us, too. If Gum Baby brought you, that makes you one of us."

I coughed, and Gum Baby shifted on my shoulder, but neither of us tried to argue with her. I met the little doll's eyes, and an unspoken agreement passed between us. *Get to safety, and then we'll explain everything.* I got the impression from Ayanna's reaction that Gum Baby had done a bit more than she was supposed to.

Ayanna stared at the sea. "I've never seen the Maafa's minions act like this."

"The Mafia?" I looked from her to Gum Baby. "Why would—?"

The raft touched down on the sea with a bump and a splash, making me stumble. Ayanna clapped her hand over her mouth, like she'd said something she shouldn't have, and moved to the center of the raft, calling out instructions.

"Gum Baby?" I asked. "Why would the

Mafia—?" "Not the Mafia, the *Maafa*!" "Oh.

What's the Maafa?"

*"Shh."* Gum Baby patted my head absentmindedly and scanned the area. The curtain of fog hung about a hundred yards away. So close, yet so far.

“Boy! Hey!” Ayanna motioned to me. “We need your help.” “The name’s Tristan. Not *boy*.”

“Tristan, then. We made the shallows, but the water’s still too deep for some of the Midfolk.”

“Midfolk?”

She gestured at the cloaked people gathering their things. I shrugged. Whatever the weird cult members wanted to call each other made no difference to me. But a few of them *were* on the small side, and I didn’t want a current to drag them back to where the bone ships waited.

Sometimes you just have to join the party, no matter how strange it is.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked, rolling up the sleeves of my hoodie.

“You and BF hop over the side. You two are the biggest. I’ll keep the raft clear of the flames—y’all take the rope and haul us to shore.”

The person with the yellow eyes came forward, carrying a bundle in his arms. Ayanna stepped close to talk to him.

“Be careful,” she said in a low voice. “If you get tired—”

“I will do my part,” the person said. It sounded like a snarl, but Ayanna didn’t look offended. She just nodded.

The person held the bundle out to her. “Watch Chestnutt, will you? She hasn’t recovered yet.”

“Of course.” Ayanna accepted it and cradled it like a mother would a baby. “Is she—?”

“She’s fine. She just…scares easily.”

Gum Baby stood on the edge of the raft and cupped both hands around her mouth. “Bumbletongue! Head into the trees!”

“My name. Is. Tristan.”

“Tristan, Bumbletongue. It all sounds the same. Gum Baby can’t keep track.”

“Just try and keep the journal out of the water this time,” I said. It had already gotten wet once, and while I couldn’t believe I was actually trusting her with it, I needed both hands free.

“BF,” Ayanna said, “give me your cloak. It’ll drag you down.”

The person named BF nodded, then shrugged off his garment. My jaw dropped and I choked on my words.

“Sweet. Peaches.”

The yellow eyes.

The snout.

The person Ayanna spoke to…wasn't a person.

My mind turned to goop.

# 7
# IRON MONSTERS 101

**“GAAAAAH,” I SAID.**

A reddish-brown–furred fox, easily as big as Ayanna herself—the largest I’d ever seen—dropped his cloak on the raft. It—he—stood on his hind legs, and his muzzle twitched in wry amusement.

“I think I broke him,” BF said to Ayanna.

BF. *Brer Fox.*

“Gaaaaah,” I said.

Gum Baby shook her head. “See? That’s why you’re Bumbletongue.”

Ayanna tossed the rope toward me. The end smacked me in the forehead and fell across my outstretched arm, which was pointing at the walking, talking animal in front of me. In fact—I took a quick glance back at the other cloaked figures and inhaled sharply—he wasn’t the only one. A tail poked out here. A wing there.

“Gaaaaah.”

“Did he do this with you, too?” Brer Fox asked Gum Baby.

The little doll nodded sadly. “Gum Baby worries about him. He’s so fragile.”

Talking dolls.

Bone ships.

Burning seas.

Flying rafts.

Human-size foxes.

“Gaaaaah.”

Brer Fox slipped over the side of the raft with a wince, then grabbed the other rope that Ayanna tossed to him.

“Well,” he said, his whiskers glistening in the night, “shall we save ourselves?”

The long, mournful moan of a bone ship floated across the waves. The sound jostled me to my senses—sort of.

“Gaaaaah.” I nodded, and we both began to wade through the waist-high shallows, fleeing the desperate haunted ships behind us.

We slogged through the foggy shallows. The height of the water slowly dropped until Brer Fox and I splashed instead of waded. We grunted and snarled (guess who did which) as we dragged the raft forward. White mist hung in the air like frozen spiderwebs, and the roaring flames of the Burning Sea faded as a blanket of eerie silence covered us.

“Where are we?” I asked Brer Fox.

“The Drowned Forest,” he said, his breath coming fast and heavy. “For obvious reasons, wouldn’t you say?”

The marshy water, thick and clouded with dirt, leaves, and branches, smelled and looked awful. My socks squelched, my shorts were turning slimy green, and I didn’t even want to think about what my Chucks looked like. Mom was gonna kill me when I got home.

*If* I got home.

Something snagged my ankle and I nearly fell.

Mom was gonna have to get in line.

“Just a bit farther,” Ayanna said from the raft. She spoke in a whisper as she steered around a jagged tree stump, but the sound carried over the still water like a shout. “Keep close, everyone. Cloaks off. We need speed now. No time for stealth.”

Gum Baby hopped up next to her. “We’re safe here, right, Ayanna? They’ve never come this far into the trees.”

“Who’s *they*?” I asked. “The bone ships?”

Ayanna winced, someone gasped, and Gum Baby shook her head. “Not unless they grow some legs. Naw, it’s the—”

“Hush now, Gum Baby,” Ayanna whispered.

She glanced back over her shoulder, and I did the same, trying not to gawk. Some of the Midfolk were watching us, while the rest pretended to be busy. They had discarded their cloaks to reveal other furry faces, along with three feathery ones, and even a turtle. There were a couple of human children as well. I took a deep breath, but surprisingly, that was my only reaction. At this point they all could’ve started doing the electric slide and I would’ve shrugged and joined in. The mind can only take so much weirdness before it accepts it as a new normal.

Ayanna turned back to me. “Enough questions. You’ll scare the others. Just get ready to run—we can talk all we want back in the Thicket, I promise. But right now? We need to move.”

I tried to nod calmly, even though my face was burning. I turned back around and resolved to keep my eyes forward. A chuckle sounded to my left. Brer Fox licked his graying muzzle, and his left ear twitched forward. The right one was mangled, as if something had once chewed on it.

“You’re not from ’round here, I suppose,” he said. It wasn’t a question, but I shook my head anyway. “Where, then, if I may ask? You’ve the look of the Ridge people—or maybe the Crescent folk, now that I think about it.”

I bit my lip and kept my eyes straight ahead. See how you’d feel, talking to a fox. Gives you all sorts of willies.

“I don’t know any of those places,” I

said. “You don’t know the Alke

territories?” “Who’s Alke?”

This made Brer Fox stumble. He huffed and chuffed, emitting a yipping cough, and it took me a second to realize he was laughing.

“Who—who’s Alke. Oh, that’s…that’s a delight.” His laugh turned into a raspy wheeze, and he stopped hauling on his rope to hunch over and cough. When it didn’t stop, I quit pulling as well.

“Brer Fox?” Ayanna called, worried. “You all right?”

He waved a paw at her, but it was another minute or two before he could stand upright and breathe without coughing. He took a deep, whistling breath, then wiped his muzzle. He picked up the rope floating near his hind legs and began to pull again.

After a few moments, I cleared my throat. “I’m serious. I’m not…I don’t know this place.”

“Where are you from, then, if I may be so bold?”

My eyes flicked up to the sky, to the hole that burned like a second sun, and he followed my gaze. He stiffened and his ears flattened to his skull. The look he turned on me, as if he was struggling to hold back a snarl, made me flinch.

"You don't believe me?" I asked.

"No." The word came out almost as a bark. "No, quite the opposite. I *do* believe you."

"Really?" I pulled the raft in silence for another few seconds, then sighed. "I don't quite believe it myself right now. I just…I just want to get back?"

He didn't answer, though from time to time he'd glance up at the sky, then look around. I took that to mean he didn't have a clue as to how I would do that, and I trudged along in a sour mood.

The water was only ankle-deep now, and the mist cleared a bit to reveal glimpses of a sprawling forest of moss-covered trees. Vines dangled from low-hanging branches, and roots dipped in and out of the water, while the treetops disappeared into blurry white, as if some supreme cartoonist had forgotten to finish drawing them. The air felt thick and humid, and my neck tingled like someone was watching me.

Brer Fox stared at me as I tried to shake off the feeling. "Good. You sense it as well. Be wary, my boy. We've not escaped just yet. That hole in the sky is causing creatures far worse than bone ships to go into a right frenzy. You want to know how to get back to wherever you tumbled from? Stay alive."

I swallowed hard, and we entered the forest.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. In his prime, Brer Fox would have been glorious and fearsome. Even now I could see traces of his red-and-silver fur through the gray. His tongue lolled out as he panted with exhaustion, and his teeth still looked wicked and sharp.

"My friend," I said suddenly, "used to tell me a story."

"Good friends will do that," he commented. "But I'd be wary of telling the full tale here. Stories are powerful magic. You'll find that out soon enough. Best only summarize."

I nodded, though I didn't entirely understand what he meant. "It was an old story. A folktale, really. About a rabbit, a bear…and a fox. The bear and fox would try their best to catch and eat that rabbit, but he was too smart. He always got away."

Brer Fox made a weird noise in his throat. A chattering, whining sort of sound. He shook his head. “Too smart indeed.”

“So…?”

“Am I that fox? Hm. I suppose I am.”

I nodded. “And the rabbit and bear?”

“I suspect you’ll see Brer Rabbit soon enough.”

As soon as he said that, I remembered the vision in my grandparents’ car. The large, weary, and bruised rabbit, anxious and jumpy. So had that been real, and not a dream like I’d assumed? My mind reeled. First Gum Baby, now Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit. All of them from stories Eddie had collected, that Nana had told, that I’d read in some form while growing up. And now I stood with the very same characters, plucked straight out of a book.

Or had I been plunked *into* one?

“And the bear?”

Fox’s tail swished angrily, and he bared his teeth. “Bear isn’t here,” was all he said, and that was that.

The raft ran aground—now the Midfolk would have to continue on foot to this Thicket place. Wherever it was, everyone seemed eager to get there. I could read the hope in their eyes as they helped each other get ready. Ayanna whispered soothing reassurances, and Brer Fox and I assisted as they disembarked. I kept my face neutral as I took wrinkled paws as well as brown hands like mine and lifted the Midfolk off the raft. An old crow cawed her thanks and flapped ahead with two smaller crows following after her, joining the rest as we started to walk.

Some of the puddles on the forest floor were too deep for Gum Baby, so she rode on my shoulder, still holding the journal, and shouted encouragement.

“Pick up them feet!”

“This ain’t a field trip!”

“Don’t make Gum Baby put some pep back in your step—Oh, sorry, Ayanna. Didn’t know it was you.”

With Gum Baby blaring in my ear, I fell back to check on an old turtle the size of a dinner plate (“Call me Tarrypin, sonny. Mr. Turtle is my pappy.”), who was struggling to climb over a partially submerged root. I lifted him over it, then we scrambled after the rest of the group.

Ayanna shook her head. “How you and Gum Baby paired up should make a fine tale.”

Gum Baby bounced on my shoulder and nearly fell off as I hurdled a stump. “What, him?” she said. “Gum Baby barely knows the guy.”

I shrugged without warning her, and the little doll toppled backward. She just managed to grab on to my hood and screamed at me in her shrill voice.

“BUMBLETONGUE, GUM BABY GONNA WHOOP YOU LIKE YOUR BUTT’S ON FIRE! THIS AIN’T FUNNY! YOU GONNA PAY, YOU HEAR GUM BABY?”

“*Shh*, y’all!” Ayanna whispered, but a small smile slipped across her face.

Gum Baby managed to scramble back up to her perch on my shoulder, where she whispered other gruesome threats in my ear. Then she dropped Eddie’s journal in my hood, jumped down onto Tarrypin’s back, and made rude gestures at me with her little carved hands as the two trundled off after the others. I rolled my eyes and slipped the journal into my cargo shorts’ pocket. Ayanna’s smile transformed into a grin.

“She’s a trip,” she said.

“She’s something, all right,” I agreed. We separated for a moment to help the others navigate the trees and branches but were soon running side by side again. I hesitated, then asked the question that had been bugging me.

“Who are you?”

She wrinkled her eyebrows in confusion. “You don’t know my name?”

“No. I mean, yes, but like, all of you. Brer Fox, Gum Baby—you all are from stories, but now…”

“Oh.”

I waited, and she dodged a low-hanging branch (I didn’t, in case you cared) and thought about her answer.

“I’m not sure how to explain it. Brer Rabbit, or John Henry—they normally do all the introductions.”

I stumbled over a tree root and nearly face-planted in a smelly, squelchy mud puddle. “John Henry?” The giant man from my vision popped into my mind. Of course. If Brer Rabbit and Gum Baby were there, he would be as well.

“Mm-hmm. Watch out for those roots, by the way.”

Her sarcasm made my ears burn. “Oh, thanks. I’ll try.”

She took a deep breath. “I heard you and Fox talking earlier. This world, as messed up as it is right now, is called Alke. We’re in MidPass, an island in the Burning Sea.”

I stopped in my tracks. “Does that mean we’re trapped here? Surrounded by fire and those bone ships?” Panic started to bubble in my chest until Ayanna grabbed my wrist.

“We’re not trapped. Just…waiting for the right time.”

I nodded, though I didn’t really understand, and she let go. We hurried to catch up with the group.

“The Burning Sea back there cuts us off from the mainland,” Ayanna went on, “but we’re still a part of Alke. A territory, if you want to call it that.”

“Like Chicago is in Illinois,” I said.

She shrugged. “Sure, I guess. But, for better or worse, this is our home.”

“Okay, I get that now. But…” I hesitated, unsure of how to ask my next question. “People and”—I started to say *animals*, but stopped short —“creatures. From stories. How come?”

Ayanna grinned. “Okay, I’m starting to see where the nickname Bumbletongue came from.” She ducked a twig I threw at her, then got serious. “The way John Henry tells it, your world and ours are like twins. No, wait, that’s a bad example.” She wrinkled her forehead, then sighed. “How does he put it? Alke…Alke is the dream to your world’s reality. The tales, the fables, the things you think are made up, they exist here. We aren’t just stories—we’re real, with hopes and dreams and fears just like you, and right now we’re all just trying to make it back home before—” She broke off, but I knew where she was going.

“Before the Maafa, whatever that is, captures us with the bone ships,” I finished.

“It’s not just bone ships.”

I stopped. She started to say something more, when a hissed warning sliced through the trees. Everyone skidded to a stop. Brer Fox stood tall, his good ear flicking and his head whipping left and right as he sniffed the air. Ayanna and I crept up to his side, comforting Midfolk as we went. When we reached him, his teeth were bared and his hackles raised.

“We’re being hunted,” he said, and a chill went down my spine.

# 8
# FETTERLINGS

**HUNTED.**

By what? I wondered. I couldn't hear anything. The forest was dead silent. We were the only things breathing or moving. I hoped it stayed that way.

"There's a bridge, just up a ways, that marks the edge of the Thicket," Ayanna whispered. "We'll cross it, run north as fast as we can, and then other Midfolk should be able to help us."

"And if whoever is hunting us follows?" I asked. "What then?"

Ayanna didn't look at me. "Don't. Let them. Follow. Got it?" Brer

Fox's mangled ear twitched. He pawed at it, then noticed me watching. "Lets me know when trouble's afoot, it

does." "And?"

It twitched again, then quivered and went flat. I guess that was answer enough.

"What are we running from?" I asked. "In the stories—"

"This ain't nothing like the stories you've heard," Brer Fox said. "And we try to keep their names out our mouths if at all possible. Seems like discussing them brings them around faster."

With that cryptic comment, we started off.

"The river's just ahead!"

The call got passed back like a relay baton, and everyone who heard it found a new burst of energy. A dot of light pierced the gray-green stillness. The break in the forest grew as we sprinted to it like moths to a flame. If we could make it there, it felt like our troubles would—

A rattling sound filled the forest, like a bunch of chains swinging in the wind.

I slowed to look around and Brer Fox snarled at me.

"Keep moving!"

The rattling came again and again from everywhere all at once. Behind us, from our left, from our right—like something was herding us onward. The sounds rolled in on top of each other.

We all huffed along, wheezing and choking.

"Quickly now! To the bridge!"

We burst out of the Drowned Forest into a clearing. There the thick mud had dried to a dark, flaky crust like an old scab, and a layer of leaves covered the ground like a raggedy Band-Aid. We skidded to a stop. A rickety bridge made of split logs and woven vines dangled across a steep, rocky ravine. The largest river I'd ever seen surged along beneath it, roaring and carrying branches over sharp rocks and around twisty turns.

A high-pitched scraping sound, like nails on a chalkboard, ripped through the air. I clapped my hands over my ears and winced, and Tarrypin moaned. Brer Fox dropped to the ground and yipped in pain. The others reacted similarly. Even Ayanna scrunched down like the noise hurt her. Only Gum Baby seemed unaffected. She ran over to each of us in turn, pushing with her tiny arms, trying to get us to move. She said something, but I couldn't hear her over the screeching. Finally she gave up and ran to the bridge.

Near the edge of the ravine, just before it dropped off to the hungry river below, she paused. Something in the leaves grabbed her attention, and she seemed transfixed by it.

Frozen stiff, almost.

With my ears still covered, I stumbled over and stopped short of Gum Baby and the steep drop-off behind her.

"What's wrong?" I yelled.

She didn't answer. Her body jerked—first left, then right—and I squinted.

"Gum Baby? What are you doing? We need to—Oh my sweet peaches."

At first I thought it was a snake. An easy mistake, really. It wrapped itself around Gum Baby, and a trick of the dim light gave it a link pattern, like a rattlesnake.

But then I realized quite a few things at once.

First: The “snake” was actually a chain-like creature with a metal shackle for a head.

Second: It held Gum Baby fast, its cuff-head snapping around her neck like a collar, the long chain attached to it coiling around her tiny wooden body.

Third: More of those things were filling the tiny clearing.

Fourth: My shorts were glowing.

Green light grew brighter and brighter, filling the clearing and dashing away the shadows, and it took me a few seconds to understand that the light was coming from my pocket—from Eddie’s journal.

Soft moans floated up from the Midfolk huddled behind me, but my attention stayed glued on Gum Baby’s helpless struggles. She jerked left and right, but the chain-thing only squeezed tighter.

Brer Fox staggered forward out of the cluster into the middle of the clearing, his ears flat to his skull. He was still yards away from me and Gum Baby, too far to help, and he froze when he saw the chain creatures rising out of the grass, dangling from trees, and creeping along the ground. His hackles rose like needles on a porcupine, and he snarled.

“Fetterlings.”

“Fetter what?” I shouted back.

“A type of iron monster.”

Two of the creatures—fetterlings—swayed from branches just off to my right, near the edge of the ravine, and I got a good look at them. They ranged in size. The littlest, like the one that had trapped Gum Baby, only had the collar head. Their chain links were no longer than my thumb. The bigger ones had the collar, much thicker chains, and chain-like arms that ended in open manacles.

“See those pincer hands?” Brer Fox said as the fetterlings’ appendages clacked together. “They use those to drag off their victims.”

I paled and my mouth went dry. “Drag

off?” “To their leader.”

I gulped. “You mean the Maa—”

“Don’t. Don’t say it.” Brer Fox dropped to all fours and called out instructions. “Slowly, and carefully—”

“One of them has Gum Baby!” I blurted out. I hated the way my voice cracked with fear, and the way everyone seemed to look at me when they heard it. Even the monsters. But it was just the two of us, a boy and a doll, and you know what? It was scary. There. I said it.

More fetterlings rose off the ground. We were trapped.

Some blocked our path to the bridge on the north side of the clearing, right where Gum Baby and I stood. Others crept through the grass on the east and west. And back by the forest edge behind us, across the clearing and near where Ayanna had been bringing up the rear, more fetterlings swarmed out of the trees.

“Ayanna?” Brer Fox called.

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking,” she said, her voice filled with desperation.

The fetterlings swayed back and forth as they slipped closer and closer. The group blocking the bridge rattled threateningly, tightening the trap. I prayed Ayanna would come up with a plan soon, but as I looked back and our eyes met, I saw the despair in her face, the same expression she had worn back on the raft when we were above the bone ships. There were just too many adversaries.

Brer Fox recognized her expression as well.

His posture relaxed. Suddenly he seemed so old, just a graying forest fox living out his final days, a fact he had made peace with.

“Make sure Chestnutt gets home safe,” he said to her.

He lifted his muzzle to the sky and a whining scream ripped from his throat. Then, before anyone could stop him, he threw himself at the group of fetterlings near the forest edge.

“Noooooo!” Ayanna and I screamed at once, and the night exploded into a frenzy.

I don’t think the fetterlings expected their prey to hunt them. Fox’s attack took them by surprise, so he was able to dispatch several bigger monsters before they knew what had hit them. His jaws clamped down on one, his claws swiped at another, and it looked like a silver tornado whirled in the clearing as the metal monsters disintegrated into broken links and rust.

But the fetterlings soon recovered and began to overwhelm him.

“Go!” Brer Fox roared before he disappeared beneath a wriggling pile of iron monsters.

The group of fetterlings blocking the bridge swarmed past us to attack the threat, and Ayanna jumped into action.

“Quickly now,” she said to the Midfolk, her voice alternating between a yell and a sob. “To the bridge. Come on, Tristan!” She ran ahead.

I stomped my foot on the small fetterling holding Gum Baby, and it screeched in pain. I did it again, then a third time, driving my heel into the thin chain link just below the base of the collar head, until it opened with a small click.

“Tristan!” Gum Baby cried. I snatched her up along with Tarrypin, who’d disappeared into his shell, and put both of them in my hood. I sprinted to the bridge, covering the distance in a few steps, and skidded to a stop next to Ayanna. The bridge wobbled and swayed under the Midfolk’s rushing feet and paws.

When everyone else had made it safely to the other side, I set Gum Baby and Tarrypin down and gave them a nudge forward. “Your turn,” I said.

Yips and howls echoed behind us, and I turned to see fetterlings peeling themselves off the pile to creep toward the bridge. Big ones. They shook and rattled, their lower bodies slithering like snakes while their cuffs snapped and their collar heads clacked.

A feeble gray paw emerged from the pile behind them, struggling to evade their grasp.

The green light from Eddie’s journal still pulsed in my pocket.

A memory unlocked itself in my mind.

A hand extending from beneath a mangled school bus seat.

The image hit me square in the chest. My hands trembled, and I started breathing faster and faster. Just for a second I could see Eddie reaching for me on the day of the accident. The day I failed to save him.

“Tristan? We have to go. Now, Tristan!”

Two voices echoed in my ear. One in the present, one in the past. Ayanna’s…and a teacher’s aide. Both wanted the same thing—for me to leave someone behind.

“Tristan?” Ayanna called. “What are you doing?

Move!” But it was too late.

Two fetterlings dashed forward. One tried to encircle my ankles, while the other went for my wrists. I started to skip backward, but my foot hit something. A third fetterling had slithered through the leaves behind me and tripped me up.

“Tristan!”

I landed hard on my back, but immediately I rolled to my right, away from the fetterlings. A collar head snapped shut on the dust where my own head had been moments before. Eddie’s journal kept glowing. I struggled to my feet and was just about to give Brer Fox the signal that I was coming to help, when something slammed into my left side.

“Ooomph!” The air abandoned my lungs.

*Click*

The fetterling who’d crashed into me snapped a cuff on my left hand, and cold iron bit into my wrist.

# 9
# THE PAPER GIANT

**I PANICKED.**

"Get off me!" I battered the fetterling with my right hand. Just when its grip seemed to loosen, another monster curled around my right bicep. More fetterlings slithered forward and tangled up my legs. No matter how much I struggled, I couldn't free myself.

A loud scraping screech came from the trees.

All the iron monsters in the clearing grew still for a moment. Then the group holding me and those locked around Fox hauled us both toward the forest. The treetops rustled and branches snapped as more of the fiendish creatures raced to join the fight.

"Tristan…" Brer Fox said in a low voice.

"Don't say it."

"You have to get them to safety."

"Don't say that," I whispered. "You're coming, too."

"Ayanna!" BF shouted. "I know you're still there. You never follow your own orders. Tell the others what I did! You hear? Give my story a good ending for once. Tell them I—"

A fetterling collar snapped over Brer Fox's mouth. The chain grew taut, and he was yanked off his feet and hurtled into the forest gloom.

All the fetterlings turned to me.

My eyes stayed on the spot where the fox had disappeared. He'd been taken to the Maafa, and I hadn't been able to stop it. Once again, I'd failed to save someone who had needed my help.

I thought fairy tales were supposed to have happy endings. What was the moral of this story?

Rustling noises pulled me from my daze as the other fetterlings approached me.

Eddie's journal began to flash in my pocket.

Green light pulsed quicker and quicker until it surged in a hot white flare that blinded everyone in the clearing. When the light faded and my eyes adjusted, my heart leaped into my throat. A rusty fetterling collar hovered inches away from my neck, looking rough and sharp. But that didn't matter.

Hundreds of pages were floating in the clearing.

The leather binding of Eddie's journal lay open and empty on the ground. How had it gotten there? I tried to feel my pocket, but the fetterlings still had my arms and legs pinned. They rattled as I struggled but otherwise didn't pay me any mind. The wondrous display had them riveted, like cats watching a laser pointer.

The journal pages spun and coiled in the air until they formed a humanoid figure. It stood between me and the mass of fetterlings. One arm reached up and touched its featureless face, as if it was adjusting something. It was a gesture so familiar, so routine for anyone who'd ever worn glasses, that my whole body locked up like cement, then went limp.

"Eddie?" I whispered.

The paper giant raised its arm.

If you'd been in my place, you might say you saw a casual wave. I saw my best friend's fist raised, his standard greeting when he couldn't be bothered because his nose was buried in a book. A tear rolled down my face, followed by another.

The fetterlings screeched their challenge, and the forest swelled with the harsh sound.

The ones holding my arms and legs let go. They rattled and clacked their manacles, and then charged the paper figure. But the iron monsters couldn't get a grip on any of the pages. I worried as more and more fetterlings rushed to enter the battle, but the giant just kept swinging blow

after blow, scattering monsters to the trees. Still the chain creatures swarmed.

I stumbled backward.

Several fetterlings had managed to coil around Eddie's page giant like a python, but huge paper fists were hammering them left and right. The minions surged in a frenzy around the figure's legs, snapping and clamping, snatching pages with each attack. The battle edged closer to the trees, and I realized the fetterlings were dragging the giant away, back to wherever they had taken Brer Fox.

"No!" I shouted, sprinting after them. Fetterlings broke off to attack me, and I punched them like I'd never punched before. My knuckles had no protection, but the pain didn't matter. Nothing mattered except reaching my best friend. He'd returned when I needed him. He'd come back for me, to save me from a nightmare, just like he'd said he always would.

Losing him again would destroy me.

"Eddie!"

The battle moved into the forest and I followed.

"Tristan!" Ayanna called to me from across the bridge. I'd forgotten about the Midfolk before. I ignored them now.

A fetterling reared up in my face. I ducked its attack and slammed home an uppercut. Another slithered up and I snapped two quick jabs and a hook. Dad would've been proud.

"Eddie!"

I couldn't see the giant or any fetterlings now, but I could still hear the rustling, rattling skirmish. I scrambled after it, but soon the sounds faded away, too. I tried to follow the signs they'd left behind. Broken branches. Crushed logs. Then even those disappeared. I spun in circles, tears flowing, searching for a trail, for any clue that would give me hope.

Nothing.

I staggered up to a tree and collapsed under it in the deafening silence.

They found me there some time later. Crying. Knuckles bleeding. Sitting in mud. Knees drawn to my chest, my back against some dead tree.

Alone.

# *10*
# THE THICKET

**I WOKE UP IN A** panic, drenched in sweat.

A voice echoed in my ears. *Thanks for the book, boy.*

Uncle C.

As the shadows and whispers faded, everything seemed fuzzy and distant, like a dream dissipating in the morning, but a throbbing pain in my knuckles quickly brought me back to reality.

I was tucked in a small wooden bed beneath soft covers that didn't reach my feet. My current sanctuary was a room with thorny branches covering the walls and the ceiling. Not little thorns, either, you get me, but knife-size prickles that looked like they were daring you to test them.

I didn't, of course. Even if I'd wanted to, every inch of my body hurt.

Not to mention my heart.

That hurt worst of all. I'd lost Eddie's journal to monsters, monsters serving something called a Maafa. And now it was in the hands of a haint— one of those evil spirits Nana had mentioned. Was Uncle C the Maafa? There were too many questions and not enough answers. None I liked, anyway.

I squeezed my eyes shut, sending the tangled nightmares back to the corners of my mind, then opened them to continue to examine my surroundings. Sunlight trickled in through gaps in the ceiling. The room

was warm—and cozy, despite the thorns. My bed and a rough wooden chair beside it were the only pieces of furniture. The walls were made of branches as thick as my arm, woven together like wicker baskets. Vines with tiny wildflowers crept up to the ceiling, filling the air with the scent of summertime fields. And the floor…I leaned over the side of the bed to get a better look.

Yup.

Dirt. Dark as night, soft and crumbly, with tender green shoots poking through. With a start I realized that the bedposts and the legs of the chair were growing out of the floor, thick at the base like roots, and coiling together.

Something rustled as I tried to make sense of everything, and a small circular door I hadn't noticed opened across the room.

"Hello?" I called when no one appeared. I sat up a little. "Gum Baby?" "Oh, you're awake! Good. They were getting worried."

The voice came from the end of the bed, light and energetic, like a child's. But it wasn't the doll.

"Who's there?"

"You can't see—? Oh, right, sorry." There was a struggle, like someone wrestling with something heavy, then a sharp intake of breath, and the smallest rabbit I'd ever seen hopped onto my bed. "Hi!"

She had deep brown fur with a splash of white on her front paws, and one of her hind legs was bandaged tight. She sat back gently, twitched her nose, and waved. I found myself waving back.

"I'm Chestnutt," she said.

"Tristan," I said slowly.

"I know. I'm supposed to come fetch you. Are you ready?" "Ready for what?"

"Everyone's at the meeting. We have to decide—well, not me, but *they* have to decide who's going to go. No, wait, first we have to see if we *are* going to go, and then, if yes, *who's* going to go. I hope it's me. It sounds really exciting and—"

"Wait, wait," I said, hopelessly lost. I wriggled up into a fully seated position and rubbed my temples. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A day."

"A whole day?"

Chestnutt nodded. “Yup, yup! They carried you in night before last. You slept all yesterday and most of this morning. Do you always scream in your sleep?”

“What? I don’t know. No,” I said. “Why does it matter?”

Her nose twitched and her ears went back at my defensive tone. “It doesn’t. Sorry. Brer Fox says I should try and hold back all my questions. Says they make everyone angry.”

At the sound of Brer Fox’s name, the memory of him fighting beside me —and losing—crashed my senses and I had to take a deep breath. I balled the blanket in my fists, and my arms trembled.

Chestnutt watched me. “Do you know him?”

“Sort of. Not really. We escaped through the forest together. He fought and distracted the…He fought so the rest of us could escape.”

“Really?” She leaned forward on her front paws. “He hates violence. BF says it never solves anything, and only spreads more violence and hatred.”

I pictured the fox leaping, snarling, into the midst of the iron monsters, and I frowned, but Chestnutt didn’t notice and kept talking.

“He says wounding or hurting someone else leaves just as big a mark on the attacker,” she went on. “You can’t see it, but it’s there.”

I remembered the bundle Brer Fox had carried on the boat, before gently handing it over to Ayanna. *Make sure Chestnutt gets home safely,* he’d told her.

“How did you and Brer Fox…How did he

become—?” “My guardian?”

“Yeah. How did that happen?”

Chestnutt sat up and twitched her ears proudly. “Well—”

But she never finished. Something rustled in the walls, and her ears stood tall on her head and flicked to the door.

“Oh, I was supposed to fetch you! The meeting’s started. Come on, we have to hurry.” She hopped down from the bed and bounded through the small round door, her voice fading as she disappeared into the shadows. “Hurry!”

The childlike insistence in her tone had the blanket thrown aside and my feet hitting the cool soil-covered floor before I could think. What was it with me chasing weird little talking creatures into dark spaces? First Gum Baby, and now this.

As I stood, I thought about refusing, maybe playing up my injuries until I could figure things out, but I quickly dismissed that option. If I wanted to get back home and leave this nightmare behind, I'd need help, and it sounded like this meeting was a step in the right direction, even if I had no idea who was going to be there.

My shoes were dry and waiting for me by the door, along with my socks. Both had a slightly mildewy odor, and I sighed as I slipped them on. It had taken me seven Sundays' worth of chores to save up for those Chucks. The sacrifices we make for the greater good. Boy, I tell you….

I squeezed nervously through the thorny door, ducking and holding in my stomach, and entered a long, twisty hallway made of woven branches still carrying leaves and flowers. It smelled refreshing. There was more than enough room for me to move easily, but a thorn jabbed me when I got too close. I hunched over, sucked my injured thumb, and limped on.

Chestnutt waited for me around a curve. The corridor split, and she twitched her ears at the path on the right. "This way," she said, hopping ahead.

"What is this place?" I asked, staring at the grass growing underfoot, a living carpet that felt as soft as anything you could buy in a store.

"This tunnel?"

"All of it. This whole inside forest-like thing? Where are we?" "Oh, that's easy. You're in the Thicket."

"The Thicket…Ayanna mentioned that name. Is this like some sort of hideout?" And speaking of my savior, where was she? Would she be at the meeting?

"Yup, yup." Chestnutt wiggled an ear at me. "It's a good thing Ayanna found you. And Gum Baby, too, I guess. She's good at that sort of thing— finding, rescuing. I want to be like her when I get bigger. Or Brer Fox. Or both. Yep, both. That way I'll be superstrong and I can protect all of Alke." "Alke? Not MidPass?" I ducked a particularly nasty collection of thorns dangling from the ceiling. All the place names were starting to run together, and I'd never been good at keeping details like that straight.

"MidPass is *in* Alke, silly! I want to protect everyone." She stopped and thought for a second. "Though things aren't that great between MidPass and the rest of Alke right now. But you didn't hear that from me!"

"Um…"

"BF says not to mention it to strangers, on account of we shouldn't be worrying everybody, even though the Thicket is under siege, and it's our last hideout, and if anything happened to it we'd all be lost, and the M—"

She stopped and I nearly stumbled over her. Chestnutt flicked her ears in worry.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm doing it again. Talking too much."

"About the Maafa? That's what you were going to say, right?"

The little rabbit shivered violently, as if she was seconds from falling apart—literally. I gingerly sank down to one knee, keeping a close eye on a thorn at butt level, and said, "Hey, hey, it's okay. Forget I said that, all right? I'm new here, and everything's kind of freaking me out right now."

Chestnutt's chest fluttered in and out, and she shook her head, continuing as if she hadn't heard me. "Brer Fox says not to say that name. Talking about it gives the iron monsters strength, and then nobody will be safe. And I've been blabbing, and now we're going to get attacked, and it'll be all my fault, and why do I do that? Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid—"

"Hey." I reached a hand out but paused just before I touched her. Some people didn't like to be touched, and I figured animals might feel the same way. "Hey, that's not true."

"It's not? How do you know?"

"Because someone once told me it isn't." "They did?" She sniffed.

I remembered one of my first sessions with my counselor, Mr. Richardson, after the bus accident. "He said we can't hide from our fears. We have to be able to talk about them, or else they'll fester like poison, eating us from the inside."

Chestnutt began to calm down. "BF says I have to work on not panicking so much."

"Brer Fox has told you a lot, hasn't he?" "Yeah. Yeah, he has."

"You two were—*are* very close?" Did Chestnutt know that Brer Fox was gone? I had to choose my words carefully.

Chestnutt began to hop forward, and I stood up and followed. "Yup, yup. He rescued me when I was a baby, you know? A couple of those stupid monsters attacked my family's burrow. Brer Fox says I was the only one

left, and he carried me back here. He taught me everything." She hopped on. "A lot of lectures, though," she added.

I grinned. "Yeah. Grown-ups will do that."

We continued on in silence. The tunnel started to widen and lighten, and the buzzing noise of a large crowd floated down. Just before we reached the exit, Chestnutt slowed to a stop and looked back at me.

"It's not your fault, you know, what happened to Brer Fox," she said.

That took me by surprise. So she *did* know.

"I…I'm sorry," I stuttered. "If I had been quicker, or stronger, I might've been able to reach him. He might still—"

Chestnutt shook her head. "Brer Fox told me we can't harp on past mistakes. He said a lot of stuff like that. I don't remember it all, but what I do remember, I keep telling myself so I won't forget it. Keeping someone's words alive is like keeping them alive, right? I know you tried, and I know what Brer Fox did, and I know he's gone, but as long as I have his words, I'll have him. So it's okay. Right?"

"Right," I said softly. Eddie filled my mind, and the loss of his journal stabbed my heart anew. I'd lost his words. Did that mean he was completely lost to me now?

Chestnutt hopped on out into the noise. "Come on! It's starting."

I followed, still sorting through a heap of feelings, and not sure if I'd ever untangle them.

We entered an amphitheater-like space and I stumbled to a halt. "Sweet peaches."

Above the humongous oval-shaped room, thorny branches arched like the roof of a dome, with creeper vines and yellow seed pods hanging down like streamers from rafters. To my left, thick roots were layered on top of one another, going up and back like stadium seating, which, I realized while looking around, was exactly what it was.

Brown-skinned people of all sizes and ages sat among woodland creatures. All of them huddled in groups.

All of them bore scars on their necks, wrists, and ankles.

"Survivors," Chestnutt said quietly. When I looked at her, she twitched her nose sadly.

I almost asked *Survivors of what?* but I already knew. I could still feel the bite of the fetterlings on my wrists. "Where did they all come from?" I asked.

“All around MidPass. Once the iron monsters started terrorizing us, John Henry convinced Brer Rabbit to open up the Thicket. But if someone was too sick or too old—”

“You all would go find them,” I finished, and the pieces came together in my head. “That’s what Ayanna and you all were doing. Rescuing those who couldn’t save themselves.”

Chestnutt beamed. “Yup, yup! People like Ayanna, we call them pilots! BF used to be one, but he started getting aches, so Ayanna became his student. I was going to be next….”

She trailed off, and I swallowed a sudden lump. Her ears sank and I heard her sniffle, so I looked away to let her mourn privately.

The larger-than-usual animals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians scattered among the people in the stands were also grieving. A turtle with a gash along his shell comforted a weeping older woman who was clutching a child’s doll. Two rabbits sat on either side of a boy of about five or six. He stroked their fur gently with each hand.

“Come on,” Chestnutt whispered, and she hopped away to the right.

“This isn’t the meeting?” I looked back over my shoulder at the sea of faces, so different and yet all sharing something familiar: fear.

The other side of the amphitheater was set against what looked like a giant, wrinkled brown wall. Thick knobby whorls of the same brown extended from the wall’s base. A giant stone was nestled between them, and they curled around it to form an elevated stage of sorts. I jerked in surprise. Roots. I was looking at roots. Which meant…

“That’s the bottom of a tree?”

“That’s *the* tree,” Chestnutt corrected. “The Tree of Power.”

She hopped forward, but I stood there and craned my neck as far back as possible, trying to take in the incredible aura. The giant oak tree felt ancient, like the Bottle Trees on my grandparents’ farm. But while the Bottle Trees were guards, making sure evil spirits like Uncle C didn’t escape, the Tree of Power seemed like it wanted to protect *you.*

It was like being in the presence of a relic, or even living history. As I stood beneath the shelter of its limbs and the shadow of its trunk, it felt like I was in one of Nana’s stories. I heard something—a whisper, or faint music, maybe even a drumbeat—and it sounded so familiar. The bark on the trunk began to shimmer, like something was hidden in plain sight, and any second it would reveal itself—

“Tristan!” Chestnutt’s call broke the spell. “Hurry, the meeting’s starting!”

I shook my head and looked back at the Tree of Power, but it was no longer flickering. The moment had passed. Still…something lingered in the air, like electricity after a lightning strike. An energy. I could almost—

“Tristan!”

I frowned and, with one last glance at the enormous tree, trotted after Chestnutt to find some answers.

It took me five minutes to decide that maaaaybe going to the meeting was a bad idea.

Don’t get me wrong—I still wanted to find someone who could help me rescue Eddie’s journal and get out of this place. Adventures are cool, just not when three-foot-tall handcuffs are chasing you. But as Chestnutt led me down the gently sloping Thicket tunnel, this one with cherry-red flowers budding along the walls, I heard the echo of Gum Baby’s voice ahead of us.

“And then Gum Baby had to run for her life! That boy chased Gum Baby, screaming and hollering like his feet were on fire.”

“Mmmm,” somebody said. A woman, by the sound of it, and I hesitated. I knew that tone of voice.

“And he started calling Gum Baby names. Horrible names. Too bad to even repeat.”

“Mm-hmm,” somebody else said. Another woman. What was this, an after-church luncheon? “A year, Gum Baby. You were gone for a year. You had one job, simple, and you failed. And then you bring this boy with you —what were you thinking?”

I grinned. *Serves the little loudmouth right*, I thought, *fibbing on me like that.*

Chestnutt hopped down the tunnel and came to a stop beside a large entrance cut into the Thicket wall. The conversation continued ahead of us, but I stopped paying attention, because I heard that music again. Drums and rhythmic clapping, louder than before. I shook my head to clear it and tried to focus on what was in front of us. Light spilled into the tunnel, bright and inviting, but I’m no fool. I could see from Chestnutt’s expression that she wasn’t eager to hop through. She twitched her ears in hesitation.

“Well,” she whispered, “I should probably leave you here.”

I looked at her, then at the giant doorway, then back at her.

"Nuh-uh." "What?"

"I'm not going in there alone. I don't even know who, or what, is in there."

"It's just where they plan strategies and hold meetings and stuff like that."

"Who's *they*?"

We were holding a whispered argument, neither of us in a hurry to attract attention.

"Brer Rabbit and the others."

"Folktale characters?"

"They're gods, Tristan! Maybe they were something else in your world, but here, they're the only ones who can keep us safe. You have to remember that. Like, the Thicket? Brer built it all by himself. You never wondered how all the tunnels are just the right height for whoever's walking through them? And the thorns aren't just for decoration, either. Yup, yup, they're gods."

My jaw dropped open. In the stories, the Thicket is where Brer Rabbit tricked Brer Fox into releasing him. But it was just a prickly bush thing…. This…this was a whole city of vines and thorns. A citadel. A fortress. It was all so incredible….

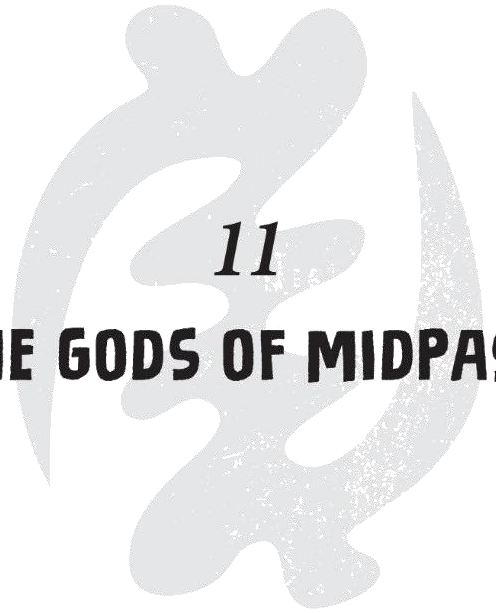
And I wanted no part of it.

"Look, I'm done with this," I said. "I appreciate all the help, and please thank whoever it was that tucked me in, but how about you just show me the exit to this place and we'll call it a day. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I just want to go home now, so if you—"

A shadow fell across the doorway, and Chestnutt and I shrank back against the tunnel wall. That might not have been the best idea. For little Chestnutt it was fine—she just ducked in between a couple of branches and hid. But me? The tall kid with the too-wide shoulders? Big mistake.

"Gaaaaah!" I shouted as a thorn jabbed me right in the bottom.

So if you ever think you've made a bad first impression—maybe you tripped and fell over your own feet, or you had ketchup on your face—just picture me, Tristan Strong, hopping into a room full of gods while trying to pull a thorn out of my butt.



# 11
# THE GODS OF MIDPASS

**BY THE TIME THE OFFENDING** piece of Thicket had been removed from my posterior and Gum Baby had stopped laughing, a trio of adults stood over me with their arms crossed and serious expressions on their faces.

"Tristan," a massive voice rumbled, "I'm glad you decided to join us." Oh my goodness.

And I thought *I* was tall.

The deep voice belonged to a chest. At least, that's what I thought, until I looked up…and up…and up…and finally saw the face looking down at me. It seemed familiar. Deep brown, with wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and also on his forehead, like he could only smile or frown.

Right now he was frowning.

"My name is—"

"John Henry," I blurted out. "I…Sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off, it's just…John Henry. Whoa."

Out of all the folktales, "The Ballad of John Henry" was my favorite. Eddie and I had done research on him once. According to some tales, he hammered steel drilling spikes into granite for a railroad company. At the

turn of the nineteenth century, men and women like him carried progress on their backs, laying tracks across America, around valleys and lakes and through mountains. John was the biggest and the strongest, the first to land a hammer blow in the morning and the last to trudge home in the evenings. In the early years after slavery, when Black people were struggling to find their way, John Henry was a rock to his small community. When he accepted a sadistic railroad magnate's challenge and raced a steam-powered drill through a mountain and emerged victorious on the other side, he became a source of pride, even after the effort stopped his heart and he collapsed dead.

That's what Eddie and I had found.

When Nana saw what we were doing, she'd made us sit and listen to her tales. Her stories were a little darker.

According to her, John Henry was a farmer, a former slave turned sharecropper, who got arrested for something ridiculous.

"You have to remember," Nana had said while sitting in her easy chair, a pile of knitting in her lap, "people were in an ugly mood at that time. When they banned slavery, it stripped thousands of plantations of free labor. Now they had to pay us. You think that went over well? Child, please."

She'd snorted, clicked her needles together, and looked over her glasses at us.

"No, they weren't going to pay for something they used to get for free. So they invented laws. Then they said we broke them. Tossed us into prison, and guess where they made those prisoners serve time? That's right. On those farms, or, like John Henry, on railroad chain gangs, hammering spikes from morning till night."

She'd leaned forward and pointed a knitting needle at us.

"So remember that. A lot of times those little facts get smudged out of the history books. If you gon' tell a story, you better be sure you're telling the right one."

What I'd thought was just a room at first was actually a forest glade, sheltered by a loose weaving of Thicket branches high above that let light in. Butterflies fluttered around flowers that filled the air with light scents of vanilla and cinnamon. A stream bubbled through the middle, surrounding a

medium-size hill with a flat top. Two elderly women stood nearby, with Gum Baby between them, and they all stared at me.

And from somewhere, just like when I was beneath the Tree of Power, I heard the faintest drumming. A rhythm that, if I tried to capture it, would disappear. It was infuriating!

But my eyes were quickly drawn back to John Henry, and I forgot everything else. I mean, he was huge! He wore blue overalls, one strap undone, and a white collared shirt soaked with sweat, the sleeves rolled up above his elbows. Both arms were folded across his chest, and I couldn't help but look around for his massive hammer.

He cleared his throat (I thought someone had fired a cannon) and nodded at the hill, the frown fading and his eyes twinkling. "Care to meet with us up top?"

I meant to say something profound. Something along the lines of how much his story meant to me, and how it had inspired me. Something deep and intelligent.

"Gaaaaah." I nodded and rubbed my sore butt.

Hi, my name is Tristan Please-Let-Me-Hide-in-a-Corner.

John Henry's frown disappeared completely, and he tried and failed to hide a smile before turning to follow the two women, who were already climbing the hill. They carried Gum Baby by the arms while she swung her legs in the air. I trailed after John Henry, thinking I hadn't had to jog like this to keep up with someone since kindergarten. Chestnutt struggled to keep pace, too, so I kneeled and she hopped gratefully into my arms.

When we got to the bottom of the hill, John Henry stopped, still towering over the women now on top. He motioned for me to climb up.

No getting around it, I thought, and that made me scowl. As I hiked the slope, I prepared a defense against whatever accusations they were going to make. That's what this was about, right? I was in some kind of trouble. That's the reason you get called to a place where you're the only kid in a gathering of adults.

As soon as I reached the top, where a wide tree stump rested in a clump of tiny white flowers, I said, "Look," trying to get ahead of the inevitable lecture headed my way, "I didn't do it. Whatever it is, I'm not sure how it happened. I just want to go home."

The women parted, and the rest of my words mushed together into a lump on my tongue and refused to come out.

A sandy-brown rabbit reclined on his back beneath the shade of a giant mushroom cap. He used his long ears to shade his eyes from the rays of sunlight leaking in through the Thicket ceiling. Plump berries lay in a pile on a leaf beside him, and he popped one into his mouth. His fur was patchy, and long scars crisscrossed his body. Every so often his legs would twitch uncontrollably, like he was trying to shake something off.

I recognized him. I just didn't expect him to be so…real.

"You're…you're Brer Rabbit," I stammered out.

"Brer."

"I'm sorry?"

"Brer. Not Brer Rabbit. Just Brer now—I really don't see a need to specify anymore, do you? I mean, Bear is gone, and now Fox is gone. It's just me, old Brer, last of the trio."

"Nice to meet you. I'm—"

Brer flapped a paw. "I know who you are. You're the one responsible for the end of the world. So, you know, thanks."

"Now, hold up. I—"

But two more voices cut me off, and each other. They spoke quickly, in light tones that sounded like birds chattering, and they finished each other's sentences like twin sisters would.

"What Brer means to say—" the first began.

"—is that you have some explaining to do, and quickly," the other finished.

A tingling, hot feeling started at the base of my neck. I tried to remain calm as I turned to the two women and really looked at them for the first time.

One was tall, with hair cut lower than mine. She wore glasses perched just at the tip of her nose, and she glared over them at me like I'd tracked mud on her new carpet. The other woman was short with thick dreadlocks that were wrapped in multicolored cloth and piled high atop her head. Their deep brown skin glimmered beneath what at first I thought were black shawls draped over their shoulders.

Then a feather, black as midnight dipped in shadows, fell to the ground.

Those weren't shawls.

They were wings.

And I knew.

*"They say the People could fly,"* I whispered.

The women caught each other's eyes, then leaned forward and stared at me even more closely.

The first said, "It seems we have—"

"—a storyteller," the second finished.

I looked between them, breathless. Nana used to tell me stories about how, over in Africa, before the horrors of slavery, people used to fly all the time. They'd whisper the powerful words, the phrases dripping in old magic, and shoot off into the sky. Brothers raced sisters. Mothers and fathers carried babies over shining lakes and snow-covered mountains.

Then came the chains and ships, and pain and whips, and the people's wings fell or were torn off. But the words of power were never forgotten. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, after a brutal day of working in blistering-hot fields, the elders would whisper them into the ears of those who needed it most, and *whoosh,* off people would soar toward freedom.

I'm not gonna lie—I gawked at the two women. John Henry chuckled.

"Tristan, this is Miss Sarah and Miss Rose." He didn't point out who was who, or I missed it, so I stood there confused until the tall, skinny woman with glasses gave a small *harrumph* and waved at her partner.

"Really helpful, John. That's Rose. I'm Sarah. Now that the introductions are finished—"

"—perhaps we can get back to who *you* are," said Rose, "and just what the two of you were thinking."

"The two of us?" I looked around, confused, until my eyes landed on the tree stump. There sat Gum Baby. She raised a sticky hand and waved.

"Hey, Bumbletongue."

"You! What lies have you been telling now? Huh?"

To my surprise, Gum Baby didn't jump up and start shouting nonsense. She didn't get angry, she didn't sap attack anything…. She didn't even look up at me. She just stared down into her lap, weaving tiny little crowns out of grass and flower petals.

"If you're quite done with your questions—" Miss Sarah said.

"—maybe you can answer a few of ours," said Miss Rose.

I flushed and turned back to the women. They glanced at each other—I'd seen that type of look before. Nothing good came after a look like that.

"Questions?" I asked.

John Henry cleared his throat. "Gum Baby here was sent to find… something—"

“I know. The book.”

He frowned, and Brer sat up. “How do you know that? No one outside this room knew anything about that.”

I took a deep breath, paused, then shook my head. “Doesn’t matter.” How could I explain the vision I’d had in the car and the other weird magic Eddie’s journal had?

John Henry leaned forward, and the giant folk hero let a rumbling growl escape his chest. “I reckon we’ll be the judges of whether it matters or not, understand?”

I looked around at all of them, glaring at me with either suspicion or outright anger. There’s a time to be stubborn, and this wasn’t it. “Yeah, fine.”

“Good. Now…what do you know of Gum Baby’s plan?”

I sighed and scratched my chin. “Uh, you and Brer sent her. Y’all were scared of something…” I remembered the sound of clanking in my vision. “The fetterlings, I guess.”

Brer flinched at the mention of the iron monsters.

It was all starting to make more sense now. “You and Brer made a hole —a tunnel—by the Tree of Power and sent Gum Baby through, telling her to find it. Find the book.”

Everyone stared at me. Brer scrambled to his feet and hopped in front of me with one giant leap. “Spy!” he snarled. “How did he follow us? Is the Warren compromised? Who told you where to find us?”

“I didn’t spy on anyone,” I said angrily.

“Liar!”

“I saw it when I touched…” There was no use trying to the hide the truth now. “When I opened my friend’s journal.”

Brer jerked back as if I’d struck him, and he swallowed whatever accusation he’d had on the tip of his tongue.

Ms. Rose looked at me skeptically. “A

journal?” I nodded.

“This journal…” Brer said slowly. “Did it have a symbol on

it?” “Yeah. Though it didn’t always….” “Describe it.”

“Um…” I squinted in concentration. “Golden. My grandmother said it was an old African symbol for a spiderweb. Something about being creative.”

Brer hopped back a few paces, wonder all over his furry face. He stroked his ears and nodded at me to go on.

"I mean, that's it," I said. "Well, except that it's been glowing…."

"A green light? Pulsing every three seconds or so?" Brer asked eagerly.

I nodded, and he clapped his front paws and laughed.

"I knew it. I knew it!" He jumped up and punched John Henry in the shoulder. "Didn't I tell you? I said we'd find it, and we did! Took a bit longer than expected, but we found it!"

John Henry grunted. "Why *did* it take so long?" Brer stopped in mid-cheer. "Eh?"

"Why did it take so long? Gum Baby thought she was there for an hour or two, but it was a year. And the flaming tear in the sky—did that have anything to do with it?" He turned to me. "Was that because of you?"

I took a deep breath and described Gum Baby's break-in, the chase through the Bottle Tree forest, and finally our fight.

Brer tapped his foot impatiently, until finally he flapped his paws and cut me off. "Oh really, John, it's simple time distortion. Various realms experience time differently—that's been known for a while. Without proper precautions someone could theoretically live a lifetime in their world and a moment in ours. It's quite complicated, you know, something I don't expect you all to pick up on right away. But you add that rip in the sky into the equation…why, all bets are off. Gum Baby pops out in the boy's realm, spends an hour upworld, but comes back through the tear between realms instead of the spell we cast?" He tutted. "Nasty stuff. She could've been smooshed."

Gum Baby gasped. "Gum Baby could've been Gum Gravy?"

Brer waved a paw. "But you're all missing the bigger picture! We can fix the tear and everything else once we build…you know." Brer turned to me, his ears practically quivering with excitement. "So, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The book! Where are Anansi's stories? We should get started right away. Preparations need to begin, no time to waste, chop-chop."

"Anansi's stories? No, it was my friend's journal." But the words died on my lips. *An old African symbol for a spider's web,* Nana had said. Anansi the Spider, whose hunger for storytelling and spinning a thrilling yarn was legendary. Anansi, who bugged the sky god Nyame into giving him the first stories, and whose legend grew as his tales spread.

I unclenched my fists and rubbed my temples. This was all giving me a headache. Could it be true that the journal was actually a magical collection of the Spider's stories?

I squeezed my eyes shut. Fine. Believe it, if only just for a second. Let's say the greatest storyteller to ever entertain *had* infused it with magic somehow. I mean, I *was* talking to a giant rabbit at this moment….

But why would Anansi give such a powerful item to a nerdy black boy from Chicago?

I opened my eyes to see everyone waiting.

"The book is more than you think," John Henry said gently but insistently. "It is the key to everything. Now hand it over."

# 12
# THE BUTTERFLY WHISPERER

**I OPENED MY MOUTH TO** answer, but nothing came out. Gum Baby peered up at me, then cast her eyes down quickly. Brer looked between us, his excitement fading and his suspicion returning.

"Where is it?"

I explained, slowly and with great difficulty, about what had happened in the Drowned Forest, nearly losing it when I admitted I hadn't been able to save Brer Fox, and clenching my fists when I got to the part with the paper giant.

Brer groaned and collapsed on the ground, his ears flopping over his eyes. "No, no, no, noooo! You lost it? We're doomed. Doomed!"

"Enough, Brer," John Henry said. "That won't get us anywhere."

Miss Rose sighed. "Fighting with Gum Baby, honestly. Damaging a Bottle Tree. Ripping the fabric between worlds…You could've destroyed everything we've built here. It's bad enough the other Alkeans won't talk to —" She broke off, and I wrinkled my forehead.

"The trouble between us and the rest of Alke only started after that blasted rip appeared," Brer muttered. "Those arrogant—"

"Brer!" Miss Sarah folded her wings firmly and narrowed her eyes. "Enough. For now, we have to deal with these two." She frowned at me, then turned to Gum Baby. "To think we gave you another chance, and this is how you chose to behave."

“Shameful,” Miss Rose added.

“Disrespectful, even.”

Gum Baby shrank even farther, her head nearly touching her stubby little legs. I actually—and I can’t believe I’m saying this—I actually felt bad for the little villain.

“Maybe she’s just not ready.”

“Maybe she never will be.”

They went on like this for several minutes. Back and forth with their criticism, sometimes of me, sometimes of Gum Baby. Brer would occasionally drop a disappointed sigh or a snide comment here or there, and John Henry lectured everyone. I tried to interject, but I couldn’t get a word in. When grown-ups get on their high horses, those things gallop for days.

Finally I just threw up my hands. “What exactly is it you want me to say?” I asked loudly. “And if I answer the questions, will y’all tell me how I can get back home?”

Everyone fell quiet.

Brer snorted. “Get back home. Right.”

I glared at him. For an inspirational god, he was becoming super annoying. “Yes, back home. Through that flaming hole.”

Brer hopped toward me, his long hind paws thumping the ground. He came up to my chest, had muscles that would put a Westlake Academy football player to shame, and now that he was standing up, one of his ears drooped. He stopped just inches from me and folded his paws across his front.

“Go back. Just like that. Leave the mess you created behind for someone else to clean up.”

“The mess *I* created?”

“Yes, you. You think you can just disappear after all the trouble you’ve caused? Think you can go around disrespecting the hard work of others, upsetting the balance between worlds like a little punk? Just for some fun? I don’t think so. No, you’re down here in the muck and mud with the rest of us, hiding and running for our lives.”

I shook my head, more to clear the tingling heat creeping down my spine than anything. “I don’t understand what you—”

“That’s right, you don’t understand. I’ve seen your type before.” Brer hopped around the hilltop, pointing at the Thicket and then at the other

gods. “No respect for anything you didn’t make. No respect for others. Wild and uncaring.”

“I have respect—”

“Impulsive. Dangerous. No pride in appearance.”

I straightened my hoodie and clenched a fist. “I am not—”

“And…” Brer said, as if I’d never spoken. He leaned forward, his paw and left ear both pointing at me accusingly. “This is possibly the worst trait of all—consistently lets others down. He said it himself! He nearly killed everyone chasing after the iron monsters just to look like a hero. What sort of friend—?”

“YOU DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME!” I shouted.

Silence settled over the glade like fine ash after a scorching fire.

“You have no idea who I am,” I said, my anger throttling my words into a hiss.

Everyone was staring at me, and I bit my lip. *Calm, Tristan. Gotta stay calm. Adults don’t like it when they’re not the only ones yelling.*

Miss Sarah looked at Miss Rose and they shook their heads. Brer hopped back a step with a smug expression on his face. John Henry sighed.

The tingling anger rippled out from my core again. My fists clenched as I tried to suppress the feeling, but those looks they gave each other…

Adults passed those looks back and forth when they didn’t want you to know what they really thought about you. Those looks could travel around a room as quick as the wind, replacing all conversation as soon as you entered. They were exchanged by adults you knew and by adults who thought they knew you. Mr. How-You-Doing-Sport and Mrs. Are-You-Okay-Sweetie would flash the looks between them before trying to dissect your last twenty-four hours.

I hated those looks.

“Tristan.”

Gum Baby’s voice snapped me out of the fog, and I realized my hands were shaking. The tingling had built to a furious itch that needed to be scratched, and I was too upset to hold back any longer. The drumming that had been lingering in the back of my head all day began to grow louder.

“You don’t know anything,” I repeated in a low growl. “You only see what you wanna see. You sent somebody to steal from a boy, because *you* wanted something. But did you see that boy? Did you know he had lost a friend? And not just a friend, but his best friend, his brother, his partner, his

road dog, his *Say no more, no words necessary* homie until the end? Did you know that all this boy had left of his friend was a book, a single book that they had worked on together, collecting the stories they had loved hearing as kids? Their big project, their shared thoughts, right? Did you know that?"

I was moving around the hilltop now. Everyone stayed silent. All of a sudden, no one had any comments. No looks. No adult-code phrases. I stared at Brer, who was examining his paw with great interest.

The tingling had moved to my fingertips. It felt as if at any moment all that pent-up energy would burst from within and sweep everyone aside.

I stopped and clenched my fists, then bent over, knuckling my temples and gritting my teeth.

"Did you know that? Huh, gods?" I asked again, straightening up. "Can you picture that boy, in a strange place, and that book is the only thing reminding him of home and good times, and someone *steals* it? That's right. Somebody breaks in and steals the only good thing this boy has left! Can you believe that?"

The anger piled behind my eyes in a pounding headache, thumping in a rhythm that felt strangely familiar. I needed to punch something, but there were no gloves, no punching bags nearby. My skull was going to split open if I didn't lash out, if I didn't channel that energy somehow.

"Tristan."

I ignored Gum Baby's call again. Everything was too much. Sadness. Confusion. Frustration. Emotions on top of emotions, all fighting to be expressed, and all anyone ever saw on the outside was an angry boy.

Unfair.

Un. Fair.

"Bumbletongue!"

"Can you picture it?" I asked again. The tingling and the throbbing headache raged out of control in one powerful surge, like a giant wave crashing on a beach and wiping out the sand castle you worked on all day. It ripped out of me and I screamed.

"CAN YOU PICTURE IT?"

Little hands grabbed me, and I could feel Gum Baby scramble up to sit on my shoulder. She patted my cheek with sticky hands.

"Tristan…look. Look."

"Let go of—"

I opened my eyes and froze.

Brer and John Henry, Miss Sarah and Miss Rose—they were all staring in amazement, their jaws hanging open.

The forest glade was filled with soft, pulsing green light, and just down the hill, all the butterflies—millions of them, it seemed—fluttered in tight formation, moving together in shapes and patterns that looked just like—

"My story?" I whispered.

And it was.

The butterflies were reenacting my tale. There was Gum Baby, slipping through my window. Over there, large black-and-yellow butterflies formed the shape of a boy, who chased her. And there was the forest, and the Bottle Tree, and the fight, and the burning rip.

I looked around. Nobody said a word as they watched, awestruck. Everyone except Gum Baby. She seemed relieved, as if she'd been proven right.

"See?" she said to the others. "You told me bring you Anansi's sign, and I did." She patted my cheek again. "I brought you an Anansesem."

# 13
# ANANSESEM

**“ANANSESEM?” I ASKED, TRIPPING OVER** the syllables. “What does that mean?”

“A storyteller,” John Henry answered. He stroked his chin in thought. “But more than just words, more than just *once upon a time* and *the end*. It’s about the entire experience, from the audience to the stage to the spectacle. There’s music, too, I reckon, but—”

“Enough!” Brer shouted. He leaped high in the air, off the hilltop, and down to the field below, scattering the butterflies. The spell was broken. They fluttered off to the flowers and trees, and Brer turned around with a glare. “Do you want to bring those iron monsters down on our heads? Of all the—”

“Brer,” John Henry rumbled in warning.

“—stupid, idiotic, brainless—”

“That’s quite enough, Brer,” Miss Sarah said.

“—dumb, selfish—”

“BRER!” all three gods shouted, and Brer finally ended his rant. He turned and, with three powerful leaps, hopped out of the forest glade and into the network of Thicket tunnels.

John Henry, Miss Sarah, and Miss Rose huddled together, murmuring under their breath, and I rolled my eyes. More “adult” conversations. But I

had to admit I was spooked. The paper giant I maybe could have ignored as a one-off freaky occurrence in a freaky place with freaky creatures. But now the butterflies…All of a sudden, *I* felt like the freaky one.

That was *not* a good feeling.

"Tristan," John Henry called, startling me. The giant man motioned for me to join them. Gum Baby broke off from harassing a cluster of butterflies and ran over as well.

"So?" she said. "Did Gum Baby do good or not?"

John Henry patted her on the head, nearly smooshing her, then looked confused when he lifted his hand to find Gum Baby stuck to it.

"Yes, you did fine. But what's important is what happens next." I frowned. "What do you mean?"

Miss Sarah smoothed one of her wings and cleared her throat. "The Thicket is in danger. We were discussing that before you, ah…"

"Before he hopped in with a thorny bottom?" Gum Baby asked.

My face grew hot with embarrassment and Miss Rose rolled her eyes. "Yes, thank you, Gum Baby," she said. "The point is—" "—in his butt," Gum Baby whispered and snickered.

"—we have a dilemma," Miss Sarah said loudly.

I looked around at all the grim faces and blew out a puff of air. "The iron monsters you all were talking about. The fetterlings."

"And hullbeasts and brand flies," Miss Rose murmured.

I didn't know what those were, but I shuddered at the names. Why did everything around here have to sound so painful? Why couldn't we be up against creatures called fluffbirds and taffypaws?

"Yeah, I guess," I continued. "Brer Fox said the iron monsters are all worked up because"—*of me*, I wanted to say—"of that giant rip in the sky. And—"

"And they're picking us off one by one," John Henry finished. "They're hunting us for some reason. Everyone who's caught gets dragged to…well, to a bad place, never to be seen again."

"To the Maa—?" I started to ask, but three voices shushed me, and someone threw sap at my head.

"We try not to call attention to that *thing*—" Miss Sarah began. "—and *you* need to be especially careful," Miss Rose finished. "Me? Why?"

“Because you’re an Anansesem,” John Henry said. His voice rumbled and he got down on one giant knee. “When you tell stories, something special happens, like you just saw with the butterflies. That’s why we call them things iron monsters, and I reckon you especially ought to do the same.”

“You have to be careful,” Miss Rose warned.

Miss Sarah nodded. “You have to focus. Concentrate on what you’re speaking about, and learn control.”

I threw up my hands. “I don’t even know what Anna…Anon…what that means!”

“It means you have Anansi’s gift,” said John Henry. “I’m still not sure how the Weaver created this magic, but what I do know is the world listens to you. And you listen to it.”

A thought jumped into my mind and I inhaled sharply. “The music…” The others looked confused, and I explained. “I’ve been hearing music ever since I arrived. Drums. Clapping. Even some singing, but it’s real faint and…”

I paused as a giant yawn escaped my mouth. The events of the past night were catching up to me, and I still didn’t know how I was going to get home, or *if* I could get home. With the tear in the sky making everyone’s lives down here a living nightmare, I wasn’t even sure I *should* go home, not without trying to help. But being some kind of magic storyteller wasn’t going to be of much use in an iron-monster attack.

Tristan Strong the butterfly whisperer. Whoop-de-poop-de-do.

Another yawn threatened to break out—all this stress was exhausting. If this was how adults felt all the time, you could miss me with that mess.

John Henry frowned. “All right, that’s enough for now. We need to do some figuring about this. Gum Baby, take Tristan to get some food with the others. And send Ayanna in here if you see her.”

Gum Baby saluted and started trotting down the grassy hill to the doorway in the thorns. I began to follow, but a deep voice stopped me.

“Tristan,” John Henry said. He pointed a massive finger at me. “This ain’t over. Somethin’ ain’t adding up completely, but there ain’t no time to toss over it now. We will speak again.”

I swallowed and nodded, then hurried after Gum Baby.

What had I gotten myself into?

# 14
# GROWING DESPERATE

**GUM BABY LED ME BACK** up the winding tunnel. She stopped every so often to examine a branch (“Gum Baby never saw this one before”) or a corner (“This is new!”) or a footprint (“Who’s been walking in Gum Baby’s halls?”).

I was only half paying attention and almost stepped on her when she stopped and scratched her head. “Gum Baby don’t remember this fork being here,” she said.

“Wait, what?” I looked around. We were at an intersection. “Are you lost?”

“Gum Baby don’t get lost, boy. She just decides to go somewhere different sometimes.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Got it. It’s this way.” Gum Baby started marching off down the leftmost path, and I sighed and followed. We walked in silence for a few seconds before she spoke again. “Everything’s so different.”

“What?”

“Everything.” Her voice was softer and less brash. “Everyone. People used to dance and sing and play—now they all quiet. Scared.”

I pursed my lips. “They said you were gone a year. A lot’s happened in that time.”

She stopped at another intersection, listened, and looked both ways before moving forward. I could hear faint voices now, and Gum Baby seemed more confident in where she was going. She glanced up at me and shook her head.

"Gum Baby wasn't gone no whole year. She left yesterday! It don't make no sense."

Something savory wafted up the hallway and my stomach rumbled. We rounded a curve and entered a large room crowded with Midfolk. Long picnic-style benches stretched in rows from end to end, with a small aisle in the middle so people could walk up to the circular cooking station in the front.

Gum Baby stopped. "See what I mean? They look so…" "Sad," I finished.

A line curled around the room, and people and animals shuffled forward. Nobody spoke, and all eyes were fixed squarely on the floor. A baby cried and was quickly shushed. Children sat in groups, some wolfing down their food and others listlessly picking at it. We got in line and Gum Baby scrambled up onto my shoulder.

"Gum Baby don't know anybody in here," she said in frustration. "All these new faces."

"Refugees?" I guessed. "From around MidPass." "But those ain't MidPass clothes."

She pointed to a little boy who was draping his beaded cloak around his even littler sister as she clung to his shoulder. The boy offered her a drink of water from a tall jug, but she batted it away and buried her face in his chest.

"Gum Baby," I said slowly. "Did you…see anything weird when you fell into the Burning Sea?"

"Flaming death?"

"Well, yes, but anything else? Did you…see a shadow in a room?" Gum Baby shook her head. "Nope. Why?"

The haint's cackling laughter echoed in my ears again, along with his warning.

*Don't you tell a soul, boy….*

"Just wondering."

She patted my cheek and went back to looking for anyone she might know, while I grimaced and wiped off her sticky residue and wrestled with secrets.

The haint had fallen through the tear, too. I knew that now. The presence in the Bottle Tree forest, the shadow that had seeped out of the bottle, the weird conversation with Uncle C…each encounter had involved the same evil aura that lingered like a bad aftertaste or that weird smell in my gym bag. And now he was lurking somewhere out there, doing gods-knew-what with Eddie's journal. He had seemed eager to possess it, and now he did, as much as it pained me to admit that. I had to get it back.

But how? I stared at my hands, then flexed my fingers. Apparently butterflies were at my beck and call, so maybe—

"Stew?"

The question startled me, and I blinked. "I'm sorry?"

The girl manning the cook pot sneered. "Do you want stew or not?"

"Oh, uh, yes. Please."

"Bread?"

"Yes, please."

She handed me a rough clay bowl full of steaming vegetables, seasoned rice, and a crusty chunk of bread, and I thanked her and moved on. I found a seat near the back of the room, at the edge of a table, and sat down next to a family of Midfolk with four children, each of them staring at me. They really stared when Gum Baby hopped off my shoulder and stuck her face into my food. The little terror even had the nerve to hum to herself while she scarfed my meal.

I ate from the other side of the bowl. The vegetables—onions and celery and something that resembled a purple carrot—were spicy and made my eyes water. It was also delicious. I devoured it, dipping the steaming bread in the remains to sop up every trace.

"Daaaaang, Bumbletongue, you were hungry, weren't you? Gum Baby wanted your bread, too. Now she's gotta get up and go ask for some more. You just selfish." Gum Baby walked down the table, scrounging for leftovers.

I looked around. Everyone was watching me, and my face got so hot with embarrassment my cheeks could've started a fire. One of the younger kids snickered before being shushed by his older sister, who looked to be around my age.

She smiled apologetically. "Sorry. I know how it is—you don't realize how hungry you are until you sit down in front of food."

“Yeah.” I studied the bowl, eyed the piece of onion in the bottom, and decided against slurping it up.

“My name’s Netta.”

“Tristan.”

“You just get here?” she asked. One of her siblings climbed into her lap, and she began to rock him automatically.

“Yeah. Well, yesterday. Apparently I slept for a while.” At the mention of sleep, a yawn forced its way out, and I blinked in surprise.

Netta grinned. “Beds are too comfortable after nights spent on the soggy Drowned Forest floor.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Sorry for all the questions. It’s just…not a lot of kids our age make it to the Thicket.”

I looked up, confused. Netta shrugged and nodded at the crowd. “You didn’t notice? Look around. Those iron monsters seem to prefer us older kids for some reason. Nobody knows why.”

I scanned the room. She was right—all the kids, apart from a few like Netta and myself, were younger. Children who, back in Chicago, would be in kindergarten. Why? I felt sick to my stomach.

*I’ve been waiting for you,* Uncle C had said.

Netta frowned. “You okay? You don’t look so good.”

I got up, jostling the table in my rush. “Sorry, I…I gotta go.” I hurried through the jam-packed chamber, mumbling apologies as I squeezed through, until I reached a clear space against the wall and bent over, my hands on my knees.

All those people. All those families, ripped apart and hounded through the forest, just because of me. That haint had been hunting Midfolk, somehow working with the Maafa, whatever that was, and sending iron monsters searching for me, but taking everyone they captured and…I felt like I was going to vomit everything I’d just eaten. How soon before everyone made the connection? How soon before they figured out it was all my fault?

I sank to the floor and laid my head on top of my crossed arms. A wave of exhaustion swept over me. I just wanted to sleep and wake up and the nightmare would be over. I’d be back in Chicago, Eddie would be knocking on the apartment door, and everything would be back to normal.

I just wanted to sleep.

Sleep…

Darkness.

Two torches burned on either side of me, barely illuminating a long, damp corridor. The kind of space you walk away from, not into.

But I couldn't walk away.

Something wouldn't let me.

One foot moved, then the other, and I stepped into the gloom. As I walked, the torches floated alongside me, and faces appeared in their dim light. People and animals looked out at me from inside the semitransparent walls, their horrified expressions lining each side of the hallway like twisted portraits. Manacles held them in place, and their mouths moved but nothing came out. I passed two or three before I came to one I recognized.

"Brer Fox?" I tried to stop, but my feet wouldn't obey my commands, and I kept walking. When I looked back, his silver muzzle moved as he tried to respond. "Brer Fox!" I yelled.

He was alive! There was still a chance to save him.

This thought dominated my mind so thoroughly that I didn't notice when the darkness began to lighten. Water dripped and things scurried past my feet as I trudged down the hall. Whispers echoed, and I heard a nasty laugh. Just when I thought I'd be marching forever, a door emerged out of the darkness.

I wanted to turn around, but my hand moved on its own and I couldn't stop it from pushing the door open. My feet took me through.

"Hey now, hey now. Look who it is! Where you been, Tristan?"

The shadow from before, the one I had seen when I was falling through the hole, stood in front of me. It had a form now—a body. I could see it outlined, though only in parts, as if someone had just started drawing a monster with ink and anger.

A single eye blinked open, and the haint smiled, showing a row of perfect white teeth. "You ain't avoiding old Uncle C, are you?" Something dropped out of the shadow—something I couldn't make out completely, but it looked like a flower with fuzzy white petals. It immediately withered in the darkness.

"What do you want?" I whispered.

“You ain’t been square with me, Tristan.” The shadow sounded sad. Betrayed. Like I’d stolen a dollar from it. “Naw, you ain’t been square at all. After I saved you, this is how you treat me?” A lantern flared to life, and I saw more shriveled flowers on the ground. Next to it was a book full of warped pages with a water-stained leather cover. Eddie’s journal! Somehow, someone had put it back together. I squeezed my fists so hard my fingernails bit into my palms.

“That’s mine!”

The shadow’s edges hardened, and just for a second I thought I saw a full face glaring at me—one-eyed and scowling.

“This ain’t what I thought it was, but you knew that. Where’s the magic? I can’t do nothing with this mess. I should burn this piece of trash!”

“No!” I shouted.

“Well, then you should’ve been square with me!”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But as I said that, the story scene from the Thicket glade popped into my mind.

The lantern flared again, and the smell of old rot nearly choked me. “You know exactly what I’m talking about! You made a fool out of me. But I’m a kind uncle, yes, I am. You know what I need, and you gonna get it for me. I want that spider’s power, and you gonna bring it to me, or I’ll light this wad of toilet paper on fire and come find you. And when I do find you, I’m gonna put an end to everythang and everybody who ever helped you or looked at you or even thought nice things about you. I’ll bury them all!” The lantern flickered as the haint spat out, “You hear me? I WILL COME FIND YOU!”

The words punched me in my chest, and suddenly I was flying backward, yanked by an invisible string through the door and down the hallway, until I was abruptly dumped at the entrance.

*Get me Anansi’s power, boy, or this journal of yours and everything else is kindling.*

The threat followed me, or maybe it was burned into my head. I had control of my body again, but as I turned, another voice stopped me in the darkness.

“Hey, nimrod, you’re talking to the wrong one.”

The breath left my lungs, and I whirled around. I recognized that voice. I just never expected to hear it again. “Eddie?”

“You’re talking to the wrong one.”

“Eddie! Where are you?”

He didn’t answer, though. My best friend’s voice just kept repeating that phrase, and I gripped my skull as panic and confusion and helplessness pulled me in seventeen different directions.

“EDDIE!”

Nothing.

# 15
# FUEL FOR THE GODS

**“TRISTAN?”**

My eyes snapped open. Ayanna stood over me in the crowded common area, her eyes narrowed. I stood up and swallowed a few times.

“Hey. Where’ve you been?” I asked her.

She watched me, then glanced at the people trying not to listen in. She turned and beckoned me to follow. “Not here. Somebody wants to speak to you. Come with me and I’ll explain.”

Curious, I followed Ayanna through the Thicket’s shadow-filled tunnels. Slivers of sunlight squeezed through the cracks in the branches, and I caught a glance of cloudless blue skies more than once. MidPass should’ve been a peaceful place, somewhere you could play, grow up, sing, dance, and let the magic of the world carry you along.

Instead, it was horror.

Nightmares.

Because of me.

What did the haint want with storytelling magic?

I needed to find a way to fix this. Maybe if I explained everything to John Henry and Miss Rose and Miss Sarah, they could somehow take the Anansesem power away and I’d be free to go.

“I had to go talk to some of the Midfolk,” Ayanna said suddenly. I looked at her, confused, and she sighed. “You asked me where I’d been. I

had to tell some families that we weren't able to find their loved ones." I winced. "That sounds hard."

"It is. And it never gets easier. I don't know how Brer Fox did it…."

*Brer Fox.* I wondered if I should tell her he was still alive…somewhere. But then I decided against it, remembering Uncle C's threat against anyone who even looked at me.

"And after that I had to try to convince Miss Sarah to let me go out on patrol one more time. There are still Midfolk out there we can save, I know it!" She pounded her fist into her hand. "There have to be."

I didn't know what to say to that. We walked in silence for a long time until Ayanna slowed, and I realized we were back at the indoor Thicket glade where John Henry and the others had quizzed me earlier. She turned around before we stepped inside and studied me again.

"What?" I asked.

"Did you really do it?" she asked.

My heart skipped a beat. Did she mean the tear in the sky?

"Do what?"

"You know. Bring that story to life. With magic." She said it with a bit of anger, as if I'd betrayed someone.

I let out a breath of relief. "I don't know. That's what the gods told me."

"I'm not asking them, I'm asking you. Apparently you can hear things, too?"

"I don't know, okay? I sense…something. Drums, clapping, faint music…I can't explain it, other than to say it's like having a memory just out of reach." I balled my hands into fists and sighed in frustration. "I don't know if it's that Anansesem thing, but…"

Ayanna continued to watch me. "I hope so," she muttered. "We need all the help we can get, and maybe…just maybe, with your help, we can tip the balance in our favor for once." She offered me a small smile, then walked inside.

I waited for a moment. She wanted my help…. Even after everything I'd done, and all the problems I'd caused, I could still make this right. So why did that thought paralyze me with fear?

"Tristan?"

I exhaled and followed her inside.

We walked past the hill, crossed the stream, and headed toward the trees in the back, where a large boulder sat between several trunks. At first I

thought there was a breeze, because of all the motion in the treetops, but then one of the many leaves separated and fluttered down to us.

"The butterflies!" I said in hushed awe.

The trees were covered with the butterflies from before. They'd made their homes in the branches, folding and unfolding their wings, until it looked like the entire grove was a living painting. I held out a finger and the largest butterfly I'd ever seen landed on it. Sky-blue wings splashed with yellow and white dots flapped slowly before the insect took off to flutter elsewhere.

"Peaceful, ain't it?"

John Henry's voice rumbled out of the shade. What I'd assumed was a boulder was really the giant folk hero sitting against a tree trunk. Now he turned slowly and looked at me, and my eyes widened at the hundreds of butterflies covering his arms and shoulders.

"Come here to think sometimes," he said. He glanced at Ayanna and smiled. "Thanks for bringing him. Sarah and Rose went to do a flyover of the Drowned Forest, see if they can find any stragglers. You get something to eat?"

She shook her head. "Later. I'm going back on patrol. I'll take the east side."

John Henry's eyes grew sad. "Ayanna, Rose said—"

"I'm going on patrol," she repeated stubbornly, and after a brief standoff, he sighed and nodded.

She looked at me with that almost-pleading expression again, like I was the answer to an unspoken question, before gripping her staff and stalking to the exit.

"Sit down, Tristan," said John Henry. "We need to talk."

I eased down opposite him and leaned my head against the tree trunk. John Henry watched Ayanna leave, then turned and studied my eyes. I avoided his, choosing instead to gaze at the butterflies flying above us.

"These iron monsters are killing us slowly," the big man said grimly. "It's getting to the point where folks can't step outside the Thicket without one of us gods escorting them. Even then it can get iffy."

"But," I said, "you're John Henry. You're all heroes, gods! Right? How can they—?"

"Easily. All it takes is a bunch of those sneaky metal creatures to suck up our attention, and then other ones start snatching folks left and right.

They're smart—smarter than they should be. Smarter than they used to be. The Ma—their leader is devious in ways we never could've imagined. They're learning, and they're taking our people. They're even taking our children. Our CHILDREN!" John Henry pounded his fist on the ground, sending tremors through the whole forest, and I flinched as hundreds of butterflies took flight in a flurry of silent wings.

"Who's their leader?" I asked.

He rubbed his forehead with his eyes closed for several seconds. "It ain't really a *who*. It's more of a feeling. Of devastation and destruction, hunger and greed. It's pain, and that's what it survives on. It came here with the first of us, with me and Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox and the Flying Ladies. The sadness to our joy. We managed to defeat it once. We thought if we let it sink to the bottom of the Burning Sea, and stayed vigilant, and forbade anyone from mentioning or even thinking of it, we could live peaceful lives." He looked up at the sky. "But something's brought it to the surface again, worked it up into a right fury, and it's sending everything it has after us. All the iron monsters it can dredge up from the depths are headed our way."

When he stopped speaking, I struggled with the enormity of his words.

Something had disturbed a monster it had taken all the gods to defeat.

That something was me…and the haint I'd brought along.

John Henry cleared his throat. "Brer says he has a plan. And you're part of it."

I frowned. "But…"

He winced. "I wish we could keep you out of it, but I don't see how we have a choice. We need your help."

There it was again. That word.

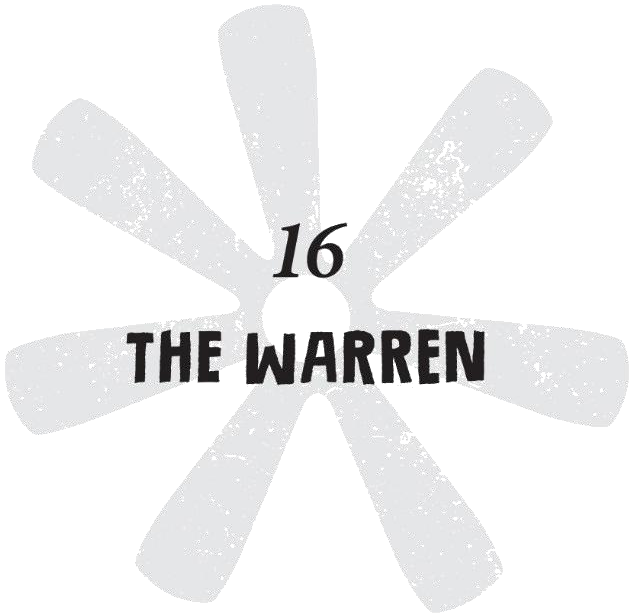
*Help.*

I started to shake my head. "I don't think I can…"

"Tristan, an Anansesem…that's something special. You may not realize it, but this world and yours are connected. The legends, the fables…all the tales you heard growing up, they give us strength. They're like fuel for us folk heroes here, the reason everyone calls us gods. And when an Anansesem tells them, they're even more powerful. You are linked with Alke more than any of us, because you carry the stories that brought us here —stories from your world and mine."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. How was I supposed to respond to that? Suddenly all of my excuses sounded trivial. I closed my eyes and squeezed my fists tight. Everyone was after this power that I didn't understand. I just longed to get rid of it, not save the world. But if I wanted to get home, what choice did I have?

"What's the plan?" I asked.



# 16
# THE WARREN

**IF YOU TOLD ME A** dude John Henry's size could squeeze through a tunnel of thorns I had to duck through, I'd laugh in your face. But somehow the Thicket seemed to shift and grow and stretch around him. Chestnutt had said the Thicket had magic woven into its vines, but it was still amazing to watch as we made our way through the maze of hallways unimpeded.

We found Brer sitting in the middle of the floor in a dome-like room. Small holes dotted the space from floor to ceiling, and behind the walls I could hear the sounds of scratching and scampering.

"Mm-hmm." Brer grunted as crumbled leaves tumbled out of an opening near his head.

"Got it," he said as a flash of gray fur disappeared into a burrow by his feet.

"I'll pass it along," he muttered as a fluffy white tail dashed away.

"This is the Warren," John Henry whispered as we watched Brer work. "Them little holes are tunnels that lead all over MidPass, and even beyond. Somebody once said a few of 'em go clear over to the mainland. Brer's friends gather information and bring it back here, where he organizes and files it away for future reference."

"He's got spies?" I blurted out. "And you accused me of being—"

“Collecting information is hardly spying,” Brer snapped back, his ears flattening in annoyance.

“Enough, you two,” John Henry said. “We’ve got a problem that has to be dealt with, and I reckon it’s time we talked about how to fix it.”

“Fine, fine. Of course,” said Brer. “But I’m waiting until the others get here—no sense in wasting my breath twice.”

The rabbit collected his scribbled notes and began sorting them without another word. John Henry shrugged an apology to me and I rolled my eyes. God or no god, Brer was working my last nerve.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose arrived a short time later, and I was surprised to see Ayanna trail them inside. While the winged goddesses both murmured greetings to me, the raft pilot gave me a brief smile that I hesitantly returned.

“Ah, good. About time.” Brer shuffled a stack of his notes and cleared his throat. “I, for one, will not dally, as I’m incredibly busy.”

“Doing what, sitting?” I said before I could stop myself.

Brer hopped to his feet in a huff. “*Some* of us, boy, actually contribute around here. *Some* of us believe that helping everyone survive is important. I solve problems—problems that you created—so spare me the insolent sarcasm and start pulling your weight.”

“I didn’t ask to come here!” I snapped.

“We didn’t ask for you either, and yet here you are.”

“Well, help me go home and I’ll get out of your hair!”

“THERE IS NO GOING HOME!” Brer exploded. He hopped inches from my face and glared. “That’s the problem! Nobody here has the ability to fly you up to a burning spiral of death that’s been hanging over our heads for a year, growing bigger and bigger. Not with hordes of iron monsters lurking in the mists! Not with brand flies swarming in the skies, chasing you this way and that! Until the tear is closed, and those iron monsters dealt with, you’re not going anywhere. So lose that idea until I tell you otherwise.”

I bit back a retort and remained silent, struggling with what he said. I was trapped there. For how long? The time difference between my world and Alke continued to throw me off. When I escaped—*if* I ever escaped, that is—how many days would have gone by at home?

“So then, what’s the plan, Brer?” John Henry threw up his arms, and his fingertips grazed the walls on opposite sides of the room. “If we can’t get

up there, that hole will keep growing, and those iron monsters from the bone ships will keep boiling out of the Burning Sea!"

Brer rubbed his furry face and sighed. "From what we've been able to gather, there's some connection between the abnormality in the sky and those creatures. I just haven't been able to figure out what it is. What we do know is that when young Fisticuffs here"—he pointed his ears at me —"battered the poor Bottle Tree, that upset something, and the iron monsters, a minor nuisance since you-know-what was defeated, have been a menace again. If we can push this boy back through and close the hole behind him, it stands to reason whatever is aggravating them will be cut off…."

Miss Sarah said, "That's all well and good—"

"—but someone still needs to get up there," her partner continued.

"And we're not trying again," they finished at the same time.

Miss Rose sniffed. "My wings still twinge in the mornings, you know."

Miss Sarah nodded, and I imagined the two goddesses beating their wings in time as they shot toward the tear in the sky.

A crash of thunder, and black feathers falling, a shriek of pain, and—

"Tristan, honey, you all right?" Miss Sarah peered at me, and I shook the vivid image from my mind. I could even smell the singed feathers.

"Fine," I croaked out.

John Henry was still arguing with Brer. "And like you just said, them monsters ain't letting no one get close enough to try," he rumbled.

Brer hesitated. "Provided we figure out a way past them, which I'm working on, there are two people I know who can make it through that fire unscathed, but only one of them can fix the rip in the sky *and* perhaps rid us of our unwelcome guest."

We all leaned forward to hear the name.

"Anansi."

# 17
# THE WORST PLAN EVER

**A BREATH OF WIND BRUSHED** across my face, and I thought I heard someone whisper my name, but when I looked around, nobody was talking to me.

John Henry and Ayanna were arguing with Brer, who had both paws crossed over his chest and a determined look on his face.

"That tear in the sky needs to be sealed shut, and who better to do it than the Weaver himself?"

"Kwaku Anansi hasn't been seen in months," Miss Sarah said.

"If we could find him, though…" said Miss Rose.

"Ain't happenin'." John Henry shook his head. "It just ain't. Even if he wasn't long gone by now, hiding somewhere, what makes you think an Alkean god is gonna help us MidPass gods?"

"Because he has to!" said Brer.

"And how do you expect to find him?"

The bickering continued, growing into shouts and hand-waving, and I shook my head. Adults are so quick to jump on us kids for acting like that, when they do the same thing. Hypocrites.

"Excuse me," I said loudly. "Hey! Excuse me!"

Everyone broke off their debate and turned toward me. "How could Anansi help us?"

Silence greeted my question for so long I started to think I had food in my teeth, until Miss Sarah slowly asked, “You don’t know about Kwaku Anansi?”

“Oh, I know about him. Spider god. Stole stories from the gods and brought them to the people. The original trickster. Makes Brer, here, look like a teacher’s pet. I mean the teacher’s favorite kid, not the teacher’s animal, though I guess you’ve got that going for you, too.”

Brer snarled, and Miss Rose hurried to cut him off. “Yes, all of that is true. But Father Anansi is also known as the Weaver. The threads he spins are powerful magic—”

“—and right now, that’s what we need,” said Miss Sarah. “Powerful magic to close the tear in the sky.”

John Henry frowned. “But even if we can find him, and even if he bends that stiff neck of his, his help don’t come cheap.”

“No,” Brer said. He sighed and dropped back to his reclining position. “It doesn’t. We’d have to offer something mighty valuable to lure him out and over to our side.”

I looked around. “And we don’t have anything? What about your hammer?”

My suggestion brought a grunt of disapproval from John Henry. “That hammer might come in handy next time those iron monsters come ’round. And besides, what’s the spider god gonna do with a hammer?”

We all fell quiet for a moment, and then Brer cleared his throat. “There is…one thing.”

“No,” John Henry said promptly.

“Johnny Boy, I’m just saying—”

“It’s too dangerous, Brer.”

“So is lying around here waiting to be snatched away by some overgrown bracelet!”

I waited for an explanation, and from their looks, so were Miss Sarah and Miss Rose, but John Henry and Brer just glowered at each other. I swear, adults act worse than sixth graders sometimes.

“Sooo…anyone going to tell us what’s too dangerous?” I finally asked.

John Henry glared a warning at Brer but didn’t say anything. Brer sat up, his ears flat to his skull.

“The Story Box,” he said.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose drew back in a flutter of black feathers and sharp inhales. John Henry clenched his fists. Ayanna gripped the carved end of her staff and narrowed her eyes.

And me?

I stood there like an idiot, confused.

"A story what?"

"Story Box. A treasure vault for tales and ballads. A repository for lullabies and fables older than the sun, some familiar, some no one has ever heard before." Brer hopped to his feet and stretched his arms wide. "This wide, and this high—though it changes in appearance depending on who carries it—and every city in Alke has their own version. The original, however…the true Story Box, Anansi's Story Box, the one he outsmarted Nyame to get…is unique."

"And you think this treasure that is already his will lure him because…"

Brer fidgeted suddenly. "Because we were working on a project for it together. Then the iron monsters attacked, and we fled our separate ways. I came back here, and Anansi disappeared, but the Story Box was left behind."

I thought about every Anansi tale Nana had told me over the years. He always had to prove himself the smartest, the trickiest, and above all, the most renowned. Losing the Story Box had to be a blow to his pride. "Anansi is a glutton for stories," I muttered.

"Watch it. It's bad business to insult a god," Brer warned. "Not that I expect someone with your manners to know that."

"It *is* a well-known fact, Brer," John Henry said. "Get that Story Box and the Weaver is liable to spin his way to us quick, fast, and in a hurry."

I looked at the giant man. "Wait. You said it was too dangerous, but Brer says every city has its own. Why don't we just use the MidPass Story Box? Isn't it good enough to lure out Anansi?" Maybe this could work…. And once Anansi was reunited with a Story Box, there'd be no need for me to stick around as the new Anansesem on the block.

John Henry looked away and sighed. "We actually don't have one. A Story Box is an important icon of our history, and we haven't yet hit on just the right combination of materials and spirit to build one with yet."

Miss Sarah said, "We've tried many times before—" "—

but each disintegrated after only a day," said Miss Rose.

“There’s some wood over on the Alkean continent,” John Henry mused. “Heard that it’s right powerful, but with things the way they are, the iron monsters and them being stubborn, it’s liable to be months before we can try again.”

That comment floated between us for a moment. Ayanna shook her head sadly like this was a constant source of disappointment.

“Okaaaaay,” I said. “We need a Story Box, and we don’t have one.” Brer cleared his throat and John Henry’s face went grim, and again he clammed up. It was obvious that he didn’t approve of what Brer was going to say next, and after hearing it, I understood why.

Brer moved closer, both ears shading his eyes as he looked at me. “No, you’re not understanding. There’s a perfectly good Story Box waiting on its next owner. I just told you we left it behind. It’s there, right now, in the Golden Crescent. That’s where Anansi and I were studying it.”

“The Golden Crescent?” I asked. “What’s that? A city or something?” “It was the jewel of Alke,” Ayanna explained. “But soon after the tear appeared, Brer said the iron monsters came and destroyed it. Any hope of Midfolk taking refuge there or in any other Alke territory disappeared after that. The cities are all afraid they’ll be the next to be overrun. And I don’t blame them.”

“But we’re not talking about taking refuge. We’re liberating the one thing in the world that gives us a fighting chance. The power in that Story Box…” Brer’s eyes narrowed to slits as he rubbed his paws together, and I shook my head. That rabbit had problems.

John Henry frowned but was no longer arguing. As much as he hated the idea, I could tell that the constant fighting, defending, leading the charge—it was starting to wear on him. On all of them. I considered Brer’s scars, and Miss Sarah’s and Miss Rose’s burned feathers. The gods were suffering right alongside the Midfolk who were hiding out in the Thicket.

John Henry sighed. “How?” was all he said.

Brer shot up and started pacing around the Warren. “Simple. Well, not that simple, but easier than you might expect. Especially with the butterfly whisperer over here.” He pointed at me and I scowled. “Anyway, a Story Box is a vessel for the magic of stories, right? It holds it, ready to bring them to life, much as an Anansesem would, only on a larger and grander scale.”

“Okay, so…” John Henry prompted.

“So, any stories told in its vicinity would be drawn to it. And vice versa.”

I didn’t like where this was going.

“If the boy—”

“The name’s Tristan,” I said, alarm entering my voice. “And I don’t think—”

“Yes, whatever. If he spun one of his tales like he did earlier, the magic from it would lead us straight to the Story Box. Then, easy as you like, someone slips in and snags the treasure, and we’re out, back home, and waiting for Kwaku Anansi to show up at the bargaining table.”

He clapped his paws and gazed around the room. John Henry looked thoughtful again, while Miss Sarah and Miss Rose seemed skeptical. Ayanna’s brow was furrowed. I shook my head, but no one paid me any attention.

Miss Sarah said, “And if someone has—”

“—an issue with us taking it?” Miss Rose finished.

“No one’s there anymore. Don’t you see? Since that…meeting, I’ve had the Warren keep track of movements in the Golden Crescent.”

John Henry narrowed his eyes, and I did the same. So Brer’s tunnels *did* go all the way to the mainland.

“All the citizens left after the iron monsters attacked,” Brer continued. “The Story Box is just sitting there, waiting for its next owner to pick it up.” The giant rabbit looked at me and frowned. “And you bring it right back here, understand? To me…to us.”

“Wait a minute…”

But they ignored me as they all fell silent, weighing the risks versus the potential benefit of having such a valuable treasure to lure Anansi.

Finally, John Henry shrugged.

“I hate to say it, but that may be our only option.”

“But who will accompany him?” Miss Rose asked. “It’s so dangerous.”

“Can I just—?” I began, but the conversation rolled right over me. “We can’t go,” said Miss Sarah. “We’re already shorthanded, and those beasts are going to attack again any day now. Besides, John Henry would be spotted a mile away, and, Brer, you’re needed here to oversee the Thicket.”

“You’re right,” John Henry said.

Ayanna cleared her throat. “Chestnutt and I will go with him. Patrols around MidPass have been called off for now, and I refuse to just sit here

and wait."

Miss Rose pursed her lips, then nodded. "It would be reassuring to have you go as well. As for Chesnutt…" She trailed off, and her partner spoke up.

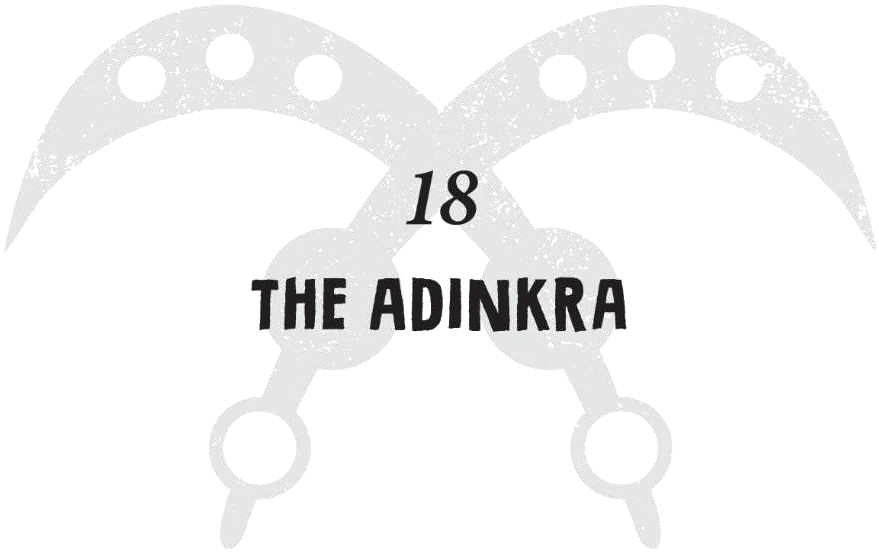
"It would get her mind off…losing Brer Fox."

John Henry clapped once, nearly scaring me half to death. "So, Tristan, you ready to be a hero?"

I stared at him.

*Ready to be a hero?* The words echoed in my ears and pounded in my skull as images of Eddie and Brer Fox came to mind. In both those instances, I'd failed to help anybody. This would be the third attempt, and this time there were even more lives at stake. I might strike out for good. I backed up, nearly stumbling in my haste, and shook my head.

"No."



# 18
# THE ADINKRA

**SEND A SEVENTH GRADER TO** do a god's job, why don't you. When I refused to go along with their plan, Brer started pulling his ears and shouting, John Henry rumbled something, and Miss Sarah and Miss Rose took turns cutting each other off. But it was Ayanna's expression that hurt the most. She looked betrayed, and she stomped out of the room, her staff gripped tight.

Finally, John Henry waved both giant arms. "Enough, enough!" He waited until everyone settled down before turning to me with a frown. "Tristan, I know this is scary, but we need your help."

"Why?" I asked, a challenge in my voice.

"Because…like Brer said—"

"Then let Brer do it. He's obviously the expert. I'm not going back out there."

Brer's ears went flat and he sneered at me. "Oh, forget it. It's obvious he's too afraid. He's done pretending to be a hero. Just as well. Fine. Whatever."

If my face got any warmer, my eyebrows would've started smoking, but I refused to look away. Let them readjust their plans. I was tired of trying to live up to everyone else's expectations.

Before I could respond, John Henry cleared his throat. "I reckon I might need to talk to Tristan for a bit. Will y'all excuse us?" He looked at me and

nodded at the door. “Let’s take a walk.”

I studied John Henry out of the corner of my eye as we headed back to the Thicket glade where he liked to think. He reminded me of both my father and Granddad. Proud, silent, stern men. His knuckles weren’t scarred and swollen like theirs, but his wrists were marked and the palms of his hands were callused.

Everybody wears life’s scars a little differently, I supposed.

The ground began to slope upward, and the tangle of barbed branches we moved through became less dense. Sunlight speared through in angled beams. Green buds could be seen on the vines that crawled up the walls, and tiny white-and-yellow flowers blossomed near the ceiling.

The flowers reminded me of Mom’s windowsill garden, and without warning I got hit with a wave of homesickness. I wanted to get back to my world, but the fetterlings and the moaning bone ships in the Burning Sea… they stood between me and home. The thought of trying to get past all that again locked up my muscles. Froze ’em stiff.

And then there was the matter of reaching the tear in the sky. It sounded impossible.

That left me with only one other choice: luring out Anansi. What if he didn’t come? What if he *did*?

I didn’t want any of this. I’d never asked to become an Anansesem.

All those thoughts grabbed and pulled at my brain, slowing me to a stumbling walk.

“So, you’re a boxer, hm?”

The question took me by surprise. I’d expected a lecture, or an interrogation, not idle conversation. After wondering for a moment whether this was a trap, I shrugged.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? You either box or you

don’t.” “I do.”

“You don’t sound happy about it. I’m surprised. Heard you gave a pretty good show in the Drowned Forest.”

“It didn’t help,” I said, with a hint of bitterness. “Couldn’t rescue Brer Fox. Lost Eddie’s journal.”

“Is that your friend? Eddie?”

I nodded, and John Henry pursed his lips. “I’m sure he’ll understand.” “He’s…not here anymore.”

I looked down and shoved my hands in the pockets of my hoodie. It smelled like outside, and my sneakers were muddy, and all I wanted to do was worry about what Nana and Granddad would say when they saw how stained everything was. I missed my old problems.

“So, you have any bouts yet?” John Henry asked. I was glad he’d moved on.

I kicked a loose twig. “One. Lost it.”

“Oh.”

“I wasn’t prepared,” I said after a second. “Couldn’t focus. Didn’t sleep well the night before, and I felt tired and couldn’t get any energy. So yeah, I lost.”

John Henry glanced at me. “Ayanna said you moved like lightning in the forest. Said your fists were a blur.”

My neck grew hot. “She said that?”

“Mm-hmm. And that don’t jibe with how you say you did in the ring. So you probably ain’t as bad as you think. Who holds the bag for you?”

“My dad.” I kicked the twig again, sending it flipping end-over-end all the way up the tunnel. “Alvin Strong. Two-time middleweight champion. Boxer extraordinaire.”

“Okay, okay. So it runs in your blood.”

I shook my head. “Only thing running in my blood is disappointment. Dad was set on me being the next champion in the family. He never lost a professional match. Me? I can’t win one fight against a tiny sticky loudmouth.”

We walked on and continued to talk about boxing. I stayed away from anything too personal, and eventually we got to discussing favorite boxers.

John Henry whistled in awe. “So this Ali…they stripped him of the title?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Disrespectful, right? All for not wanting to shoot anybody in a war. But anyway, he did his stint in the doghouse and came out smelling like roses. Won back his title and did it in style. ‘Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.’”

“That’s what he said?”

“That’s what he did.”

“Well, I’ll be. I like that. Like a butterfly, huh? Well, I’ll be.” As he said that, a few of the colorful insects flapped lazily around his head, almost as if summoned. I stared at my fingers in suspicion.

“What about you?” I asked. “Did you have a favorite? Did they even box back then?”

“Boy, hush. We boxed. Didn’t have your fancy equipment, either. Knuckles and heart was all we had, knuckles and heart.”

“So who was your favorite?”

John Henry didn’t answer. Instead, he held up a hand and eased over to the Thicket wall. He stopped, put his ear as close to it as he could without getting jabbed by thorns, and listened. After a second he moved on, shaking his head.

“Thought I heard something,” he said. I began to ask what, but he brushed me aside. “Where were we? Favorite boxer, right? That’s easy. Old Man Rawlins, hands down.”

I snickered. “Old Man Rawlins? Quit playing—he don’t even sound like a boxer. What was his record?”

John Henry stopped walking and held my eye. “One hundred fifty-three and zero.”

“No way.”

“I’m telling you, he was one hundred fifty-three and zero. No losses.” “How is that possible?”

“Old Man Rawlins was a bit of a story. See, he was never given a choice in the matter. He had to box, plain and simple.”

“Sounds familiar,” I grumbled.

But John Henry shook his head. “No, sir, you may think it’s the same, but it ain’t. Not like that. You reckon you were forced into the matter, but at the end of the day, I bet your folks would’ve let you be.”

My folks maybe, but not Granddad. But I kept that to myself.

“See, we worked on the rails, and all of us, we worked for a man we just called Boss.”

“Boss?”

“That’s it. One word. It’s the question and the answer. End and the beginning. Boss wanted you to work a little later, you worked a little later. Boss wanted that mountain drilled before noon, well, you’d better start hammerin’ by dawn. And if Boss said you were gonna box for the evening’s

entertainment, well, you just hoped the other fella was as tired as you were."

"That doesn't sound…" I broke off before I could finish, and John Henry grinned.

"I know you wasn't gonna say *fair*. Is life fair?"

I pictured Brer Fox being hauled away by a fetterling. "No. Life ain't fair."

"Good. 'Cause that's what Old Man Rawlins figured out. But he also figured out a way to get by. Every time Boss told him he had to fight, he just grabbed these thin cloth gloves with the fingers ripped away and went to the middle of camp. Ten minutes later, it'd be over. Another win."

"How?"

John Henry winked and tapped his head. "Let's see if you can figure it out. You the boxer. No rush. Just some brain food for you to chew on."

I ran through boxing tactics in my head. How could a man go 153 and 0? Especially a man named Old Man Rawlins. He sounded ancient. Older than Granddad, probably. Socks-with-sandals ancient. But no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with an answer.

We reached the entrance to the hidden glade and headed for the hill where I'd been interrogated before. John Henry stayed at the bottom and I climbed to the top so I could face him eye to eye. His hammer was slung across both shoulders, and he draped his arms over it. The head was worn and dented, but John kept it polished, and it gleamed in the warm sunshine.

He saw me eyeing it and smiled. "Must seem silly, me carrying this here hammer everywhere."

I shrugged. "No, it doesn't seem silly. If it means something to you, you should hold on to it." Then I added, "As long as you don't bring it in the shower."

"In the what, now?"

Wow. I started to stammer something, but he cut me off with a laugh. "I'm foolin' with you, boy. And yes, that's a surefire way to find your tools rusted."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Tristan," John Henry started, then stopped, and started again. "Your friend's book. It meant something to you?"

"Everything," I said right away. I rubbed the side of my pants, feeling the pocket where the journal should've been. "It meant…it meant

everything.”

John Henry nodded, then fished around in the front pouch of his overalls. “One of Sis Crow’s brood spotted this—they always got an eye for something shiny, and this little thing glows like you wouldn’t believe. Anyway, they found this in the trees, and, well…I thought you might want it.”

He held out a tattered leather cord, and the breath caught in my throat. “Is that…?”

“It ain’t much, but it’s something, and hopefully it helps a little. Doesn’t seem right that an adinkra like that should get lost.”

He dropped the tassel from Eddie’s journal into my palm, and I lost the ability to speak for a second. The charm—Anansi’s symbol—was still knotted on the end. I held it up and watched it spin in the light.

“What did you call this?”

“An adinkra. Something else that got carried over from your world. Symbols that held great meaning for the people who wore them. Our people. Kings and queens. If it came off your friend’s book, the one all this hoopla is about, I expect you might want to hold on to it.”

I looped the cord around my wrist, using my teeth to knot it, and took a deep breath. “Thank you. I thought…Well, thank you.”

“Aw, it wasn’t nothin’. In fact—”

“Ouch!” I shook my wrist and stared at the charm. The wood was blazing hot, like it was on fire.

Wait a minute.

I brought the charm close to my face, then cupped my hand around it. Sure enough, the adinkra was glowing, a soft green light that confused me for a second.

“Why…?”

A rusty squeal sounded from across the glade, and then another.

John Henry’s face went pale, and the hammer was in his hands in a blur. “It’s them iron monsters.”

# 19
# ATTACK!

**SUNLIGHT WINKED OFF METAL IN** the distance. A lot of metal.

And then the screeches started.

Iron monsters sprinted in our direction, and though they were still some ways away, I could tell their numbers were greater than before, back in the Drowned Forest. Their collars clacked together like crab claws, and they let out this awful squeal as they ran. Like old car brakes. Or metal on a sidewalk.

"Fetterlings," I whispered.

John Henry's eyes grew big and his head jerked back, like the word was a slap to the face.

Fear.

John Henry, the strongest man I'd ever seen—a folk hero, a god—felt a flash of fear. I saw how it momentarily twisted his face and forced beads of sweat to pop up on his forehead. He plunged the haft of his hammer into the ground, gripped the metal head, kneeled down, and closed his eyes.

"Brer," his voice rumbled.

My eyes went back and forth between him and the fetterlings, which were splashing across the stream. Then, to my amazement, the bark on the tree roots near our feet began to twist and swirl.

“Brer!” John Henry called again. His voice seemed to echo, and I could feel the vibrations.

I swallowed a scream when a face formed in the dirt around the hammer. Somehow, Brer was looking out at us.

“What is it?” Brer asked.

“Iron monsters have broken into the Thicket.” Now John Henry’s voice sounded way too calm. “We need help.”

“Hold on, hold on, big guy. Let me check…. There’s no switch for this, you know. Now, let’s see.”

John Henry clenched a fist as he kneeled there, waiting for Brer to finish whatever he was doing. We just had to trust that it was going to bring help, and quickly, before we were swarmed. I understood the giant man’s frustration. God or no god, Brer rubbed me the wrong way.

“Well, I’ll be,” said Brer. “Something’s off—the Thicket isn’t talking to me.”

I frowned, puzzled, but John Henry’s fist clenched even tighter as he pounded his leg softly.

“The Thicket talks to him?” I whispered.

John mumbled, “Brer hears it like you hear that drumming. It’s part of the spell he used to build this place. He’s been having trouble with it lately, though, and I—”

“Bad news, Johnny Boy,” said Brer. “This will take some time. You’re going to have to hold them off for a while.”

“Brer—”

“No time, no time. Got to get this going. Keep them back. Don’t let them reach the tunnels!”

With that last instruction his face disappeared, and John Henry growled. He leaned back, reached into the back pocket of his overalls, and pulled something out. He tossed it—no, *them*—at me. Simple fingerless brown leather gloves. The kind a rail worker might wear. “Put these on,” he said.

I did as he said and was surprised to find that they were a perfect fit.

Then he grabbed his hammer with both hands.

“Give me strength,” he whispered.

I was confused until I realized it was like a prayer before battle, and I gulped. When gods prayed, things were about to get real.

He stood, pulling the handle…and the wood stretched. It grew longer and longer—three feet, five feet, ten!—and my jaw dropped as John

Henry's hammer hummed with energy. Symbols rippled up and down the shaft, and the metal head glowed dull orange. He swung it through the air a few times and it whistled past my head, smelling of heated steel and polished wood.

"Follow me."

He took several long strides back toward the valley before I could even begin to follow, and by the time I caught up with him, he was at the sloping trail leading back up to the tunnel entrance. John Henry took two giant steps to the right, then nodded at me.

"Hold up your hands," he said. He brushed each glove gingerly with the hammer, and steam hissed from them. Strangely, I didn't feel any warmth. "There," John Henry said. "I reckon these might do the trick. That is, if you wanna help me defend our home."

When the smoke coming off the gloves cleared, I could see a symbol now branded on the back of each one, just below the knuckles. A hammer.

"You can go back if you want," John Henry said. He kept his eyes on the fetterlings, not on me. "Back into the tunnels with the others."

I swallowed and glanced at the entrance we had come out of. It was dark, yet it looked safe, like when you pull the covers over your head in the middle of the night. I could slip inside there and run as far away as possible….

But then what?

Still no way across the Burning Sea.

Still no way to reach the tear in the sky.

*And could you look at yourself ever again?* I asked myself. *At Nana?*

When I stood, the decision was made. Taking a deep breath, I moved to John Henry's side. "Maybe we should back up to the tunnel entrance," I said. "Just in case one of them gets past us."

A giant hand patted my shoulder, and he grinned, but his eyes were hard.

"Nothing's getting past us."

The fetterlings stepped out of the stream. Twenty. Thirty. A hundred. They swarmed the hill like locusts.

John Henry and I waited, him holding the hammer in both hands, me with my fists clenched inside my borrowed gloves. My blessed borrowed

gloves.

The screeching grew louder. So loud it drowned out everything else. They saw us now—they had a target, and the air filled with their hateful calls.

"Don't let them scare you," John Henry murmured. His fingers tightened on the hammer's carved wooden handle. "You are fighting for something bigger. Something stronger. Trust in that, and we'll be just fine."

I snorted. "You should've been a corner man." "I was. For Old Man Rawlins."

I stared at him, then at my hands. Were these the same gloves Rawlins had worn? I wanted to ask, but now proooobably wasn't the best time.

The fetterlings clawed their way to the top of the hill and flooded the valley. Butterflies took flight in a dazzling display of colors, and I tried to focus. The first of the iron monsters ran up to us, only to have its eyeless collar head removed by a single powerful swing of the hammer. The fetterling exploded into bits of metal and that same weird white fluff that floated up into the sky.

"Keep the tunnel entrance at your back," John Henry declared. "The glade is narrowest here—either we repel them, or the Thicket is lost." He took up a wide stance. "If I hold the valley, can you hold the hill?"

I eyed the incline, and how the path narrowed as it got closer to the top. On my left was a Thicket wall, and on my right there was a steep drop-off to where John Henry's hammer awaited. The fetterlings could only come one, two at a time at most.

I pounded my fists together. The gloves felt electric, like I was wearing lightning on my hands.

"Strongs keep punching," I said, and John Henry smiled.

"That's the spirit. The demons won't take another soul, not while we stand here!" He laughed, a great booming sound that rolled like thunder, and when the first wave of fetterlings leaped forward, his hammer was there to greet them.

One swing crashed into a group of three, sending them flying back into the crowd, and the return blow crushed two more. The air filled with screeches and floating white fluff.

But I couldn't just stand and watch. I had my own battles to fight.

A fetterling sprinted up, its collar open wide and its shackles snapping. I ducked one attack and slipped away from another. *Bob and weave,* I could

hear Dad shouting. *Then attack!* I feinted, then made a quick jab. I thought it was a decent punch, nothing special, just something to give me more room to operate, but the metal monster shrieked in pain and staggered back like I'd landed a haymaker.

The fetterling and I stopped to stare at the gloves I wore—the hammer symbol glowed an angry orange-red, and the air turned wavy above them, as though my fists were on fire.

The fetterling chittered something.

"You're telling me," I said, and swung a right hook at its head.

It exploded, showering me with broken bits of chain and fluff. Some of it got on my face and lips, and I wiped my mouth.

"Y'all are nasty," I mumbled through my sleeve.

"Tristan, look out!"

The hammer whistled inches from my head, and I ducked just as a fetterling leaped forward. The hammer met it in midair and sent it back in pieces. John Henry pivoted and forced another group to stumble backward.

"Focus!" he rumbled, and I jumped to my feet, embarrassed.

Two fetterlings tried to trap me, but I batted away their snapping manacle-claws, a grin spreading across my face as the arms disintegrated, and a fierce joy exploding inside me as I landed a combination that literally blew them away.

This was nothing like my first boxing match.

Back then I was drifting. I didn't have any purpose.

But now?

Now I had a goal. *Pop.* An objective. *Pop.* One mission, should I choose to accept it, and that was to defend the Thicket. *Pop pop.* Protect this house. *Pop pop.* They—the enemy, the fetterlings, the Maafa, Uncle C, and whoever else—they wanted to win, but I wanted it more.

*That must have been why Old Man Rawlins kept winning.*

Soon there was no time for thinking. John Henry and I fought side by side (well, not exactly…I kept some space between us, because the hammer scared me). The horde of iron monsters kept coming. I fought the longest boxing round of my life. Swing after swing, punch after punch. When one enemy was defeated, two more stepped up. Eventually, my arms started to get tired and the grin slipped off my face.

The movies, the comics, the stories—none of them mentioned this. "Johnny Boy, slight problem down here."

Brer's giant face appeared on the hillside again, and the vibrations of his booming voice sent some of the iron monsters tumbling.

John Henry gritted his teeth and kicked a fetterling off his boot, then smashed it with the handle of his hammer. "What is it, Brer? We're a mite busy here."

Brer's face raised its eyebrows in surprise. "That so? Never would've guessed. I put on a pot for tea, but I guess you won't be attending?"

I ducked a leaping fetterling and sent an uppercut into its middle as I rose. The monster exploded and Brer whistled.

"Looks like the coward grew a spine! Well done, champ." Before I could snap a reply, John Henry spoke up. "Brer!" "Okay, okay. Just wondered if you'd seen the large iron monster heading your way. Looks like the ones you're pummeling now, only ten times bigger? Maybe gives the orders?"

Hairs rose on the back of my neck.

John Henry swept away seven or eight fetterlings, giving us a second to breathe, and glared up at Brer's face. "No. Why?"

Brer frowned. "Because a little bunny told me it's about to rip its way inside."

# 20
# THE BOSSLING

**THE FAR WALL OF THE** glade exploded in a shower of broken branches and fetterlings. More butterflies took to the air as the largest fetterling I could've ever imagined tried to squeeze through a gap like a T. rex. Even though a whole field, a hill, a stream, thirty-odd yards, and a group of trees separated us, the boss fetterling (Bossling? Yeah, that sounds right.) looked huge. It surveyed the glade, then let out a high-pitched roar that made my teeth hurt.

Smaller fetterlings poured in through the breach around it, leaping over the broken branches and thundering across the field.

"John! Tristan!"

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose soared over the glade, their brilliant black wings spread wide.

"Rose, Sarah!" John Henry sounded relieved. "We need to clear the hill!"

Without a moment to lose, the ladies tucked their wings close and knifed toward the ground. At the last second they unfurled them and unleashed powerful flaps. Slicing wind gusted toward the intruders, lifting them up and sending them tumbling backward until they slammed against the rear wall and disintegrated.

But more fetterlings clawed at the hole that trapped the bossling, trying to help it get through. Meanwhile, their leader slammed from side to side, squeezing even farther into the Thicket. Just when it seemed it would pop free, thorny vines shot out of the ground and entangled it further.

"Take that, you blundering cretin!" someone shouted from behind me.

Brer leaped out of the tunnel entrance and landed next to me, finally appearing in the flesh and not as some magical face in the dirt. His fur was matted and twitching, as if his muscles were spasming, and the giant rabbit was gritting his teeth with effort. I heard a strange song in my head, like something was out of harmony, or an instrument was out of tune, and he glared at me as more vines shot out to wrangle the iron monsters.

"Still here? Ayanna and the others are leaving for the Golden Crescent and the Story Box. They need you! Have you two been chitchatting the whole time?"

I punched a fetterling before I turned to Brer, but John Henry interrupted. "He's right, Tristan! Their mission is fixin' to fail if you ain't with them. Us gods are tied up here."

Literally.

Two fetterlings were trying to clamp themselves around his barrel-size wrists. John Henry flung them into the air, then batted them into a million pieces.

"Go!" Brer shouted to me, just as the bossling forced its way in.

"Please, Tristan," Miss Rose called as Miss Sarah hurtled from the sky, a fetterling in each hand, and dashed them to pieces on the ground. "Do this for us!"

Despite the chaos from the raging battle, now that the other gods of MidPass were here, it seemed like they could hold their own. Brer, struggling with the effort, continued to tangle the fetterlings in vines and thorns. John Henry smashed his hammer down left and right, and Miss Sarah and Miss Rose launched devastating strikes over and over from high above.

They didn't need my help.

But the others did.

I threw my hands up in frustration. "Okay!" A fetterling slipped past Brer, and I nailed it with an uppercut that blew its head off. "Fine!"

"About time," Brer snarled. His left ear pointed at the door. "Now get! They're in the kitchens, stocking up, but you need to hurry. Follow the

tunnel to the right, always to the right, and you'll find them!"

The bossling finally emerged. It thundered across the field, stomped through the stream, and John Henry raced toward it, hammer in hand. The winged goddesses spiraled above, preparing for another sweeping attack, and Brer kicked high into the air, trying to close off the hole the monster had made in the Thicket's wall.

"Go!"

I turned and ran.

I sprinted through the Thicket tunnel, turning right whenever I could, and the floor began to slope upward. Gradually the passageway began to widen, until it ended in a circular room with a large hole in the ceiling. Ayanna and Chestnutt stood hunched over a familiar raft, which they'd loaded with bundles of supplies. They both looked up in surprise when I skidded to a stop next to them. Chestnutt grinned, but when she looked at Ayanna and saw the anger simmering on her face, the rabbit's smile quickly faded.

"Thought you didn't want to help," Ayanna finally said.

I clenched my fists, then forced them to relax. I deserved that. Rather than arguing, I picked up the last three bundles of supplies and tucked them on the raft, securing them with straps. Once that was done, I made to get on, but Ayanna stepped in my way.

"Oh no, you don't. You don't get to insert yourself after saying no." Frustration built up in my chest. "The gods told me I had to!" "And that's the only reason you're here?"

"Yes! No. Wait." I gripped my skull. If I'd had longer hair, I would've pulled it out. "I have to do this, I think."

"You think?" Ayanna folded her arms and Chestnutt hopped anxiously from foot to foot. "Whatever. Come on, Chestnutt. Let's go."

"Hold on." I reached out but didn't grab her arm. The look in her eyes when she turned around told me that had been a smart decision.

"What?"

"I…It's true I don't want to go."

"Well, that's—"

"No, wait. I don't want to go because I'm afraid."

There, I said it. Out loud so everyone could hear it, including me. I'd needed to admit that to myself.

“What, and we aren’t?” Ayanna asked. She stepped forward, getting in my face, and pointed back up the tunnel. “You don’t think I’m afraid of those things?”

“Not just of them. Of failing. Of letting another person down.” Speaking the words felt like ripping a bandage off—or getting my chest waxed. (I assume. Saw a video of that online once. Looked really painful.)

Ayanna’s eyes softened. “Why? ’Cause of Fox? Tristan, that wasn’t your fault. He made that choice. He sacrificed himself for us to escape. You didn’t do anything.”

*You didn’t do anything.*

She thought I meant Brer Fox, but in my mind it was Eddie’s hand I saw reaching out to me. I didn’t correct her, though—her words applied just the same.

*You didn’t do anything.*

I took a deep breath. “I…I’m trying to believe it wasn’t my fault. So…I think I need to do this. I want to help, if you’ll have me.”

She studied me, then looked at Chestnutt, who twitched an ear. Finally, Ayanna turned back and nodded. “Come on. I guess you might be useful. Besides, I’m pretty sure Miss Sarah and Miss Rose would have my hide if I refused you.”

I forced a smile and stepped onto the raft. Chestnutt hopped on beside me. Ayanna murmured a phrase, and the raft began to hum. Symbols flared briefly in the wood, and then we rose into the air. The raft climbed higher and higher, aiming for the circular hole in the ceiling, until we shot out of the darkness of the Thicket and into the red-orange glow of the afternoon sun.

MidPass stretched out below us. It felt weird leaving the others behind, but they were fighting so we could attempt this heist. Their battle was distracting the iron monsters.

The Drowned Forest lurked like a silent cemetery, and when we rotated the raft to face the curtains of mist and flame beyond, my heart skipped a beat.

The Burning Sea.

“Hold on tight,” Ayanna said, and we shot forward, on our way to steal from a god.

# 21
# BRAND FLIES

**WE SOARED OVER THE DROWNED** Forest. From here, the gaping wound in the sky looked like a part of the sunset. The farther we got from the Thicket, the more normal everything seemed.

But I knew better.

Soon the raft ascended into a thick cloud that smelled like wet coals.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Chestnutt huddled next to me but didn’t answer. Flying as high as we were, where Ayanna said we wouldn’t attract unwanted attention, the air was cold. Chestnutt shivered, and I put her in the front pouch of my hoodie. It was the least I could do.

Ayanna glanced at me, then turned back to guiding the raft. Her staff pulsed with a soft amber light. “We’re headed north, to the tip of MidPass. Then we’ll cut across the Burning Sea and aim for the top of the Golden Crescent.”

“That seems longer than the route John Henry described.”

“Yeah, well, John Henry ain’t here.” She still sounded peeved. I let the conversation die.

Chestnutt poked her nose out of the pouch. “The longer we’re in the clouds, the better,” she said. Her ears emerged and she peeked up at me. “Brand flies move slower in damp air.”

“Brand flies?” I asked. Hadn’t Miss Rose said something about those?

“That way, if a scout fly spots us,” Chestnutt went on, “we should be able to catch it before it alerts the others.”

“Scout fly?”

“Yup, yup.” She hopped out of the hoodie and dove into a supply pack. The bunny emerged with a thick pencil in her mouth, and she began to sketch a picture on the floor of the raft.

“Hey!” Ayanna complained.

“Shorry,” Chestnutt said around the pencil in her mouth. “I’ll cleanishup.”

She hopped around as she drew, and I leaned forward to take a look. “You’re pretty good!”

“Yup, yup! Ish the only reashon Mish Sharah allowed me to come.”

“Little bunny knows everything about everything,” Ayanna said with a roll of her eyes, but she smiled at Chestnutt to take the sting out of her words. “The weak points of every iron monster, schematics of every palace in every region of Alke—you name it, she can lay it out for you, no trouble at all.”

I whistled. “That’s impressive.”

Chestnutt dropped the pencil and stepped on it to keep it from rolling away. “Thanks!” She beamed. Then she tapped the diagram at my feet with her paw. Two diagrams, actually. “Take a look.”

“What am I looking at?”

“Brand flies.”

“Please tell me the pictures are this big so we can see the details.”

“Afraid not. These are almost their actual size—I might have drawn them a bit small. I can redraw them to make it more accurate if—” “No, that’s not necessary!” I yelped. “Those are some big insects.” “Iron monsters,” Ayanna corrected me. “Not just insects.”

“The one on the right, that’s the soldier fly,” Chestnutt went on. “Double-winged, it can hover or accelerate to speeds faster than a bird of prey. Two of its six legs are welded into a stinger that injects a poison. If one of those touches you, it will burn and keeps burning until you pass out.”

“Then the fetterlings come collect you,” Ayanna said, her voice grim. “The Ma—the brain behind the iron monsters has been sending wave after wave after us. It plays for keeps.”

“A one-two punch,” I muttered.

Chestnutt nodded and continued. “It took us a while to figure out what was happening at first. We’d be out gathering supplies, then someone would scream, and we’d never see them again.”

The grim finality of it all, spoken so simply, boggled my mind. This is what Uncle C was stirring up? Whipping the Maafa into a frenzy, like rabies in wild animals. The more I thought about it, the more appropriate the analogy seemed. Uncle C was a disease, the iron monsters were the symptoms, and MidPass—no, all of Alke—was suffering.

Ayanna spoke up. “I found a victim

once.” “And?” I asked, but she fell silent.

Chestnutt hopped closer and whispered to me, “She’s never talked about it, but she volunteered to be a pilot soon after that.”

I watched Ayanna as she guided the raft, her eyes constantly scanning the horizon for something. Survivors? Iron monsters? I didn’t know which, and I wasn’t sure how she could find anything in the thick mist.

My foot accidentally smudged the diagram of the scout fly and I shuddered.

“You really don’t like them, do you?” Chestnutt stared at me, then examined the drawing.

“I’m…not a big fan of insects.”

“You’re afraid of bugs?” Ayanna asked. She turned her head, and I couldn’t tell if she was smirking or not.

“No, I said I’m not a fan,” I said. My voice sounded defensive, and I cleared my throat.

“Mm-hmm.”

Chestnutt grabbed the pencil in her mouth again and began sketching more flies. “Well, I’m glad you’re not afraid—though ish okay if you are— becaush these bugsh travel in shwarms of hundreds.”

“Hundreds?” I asked, feeling faint.

“Yup, yup.”

“I once saw a swarm of a thousand,” Ayanna said.

This time I was sure I saw a little smirk on her

face. “Ish okay to be afraid,” Chestnutt whispered

to me. “I’m not afraid, okay? Just…*concerned*.”

“That’sh all right. I don’t like heightsh.”

Ayanna winced. “Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry, Chestnutt, but I needed to go higher so we wouldn’t—”

“Ish okay.” Chestnutt continued to draw. “I can’t see the ground in thish cloud, so that actually helps. And if I keep focushing on something else, that helps, too.”

“That’s why you’re drawing,” I said, feeling sorry for the little rabbit. “Yup, yup.”

“If it makes you feel better,” I whispered, “I’m not that fond of heights, either.”

The bunny looked up and twitched her nose hopefully. “You aren’t?” “Nope. Gives me the willies. And the Freddies.”

Chestnutt grinned at me, and I watched her sketch a picture of a fox and a tiny rabbit walking side by side. After a while she smudged it out and started on something else. Ayanna stared straight ahead, and I cocked my head and studied her.

“What are *you* afraid of?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow without turning to look at me. “Me? Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a thing.”

“Okay. You’re not afraid of anything. Well, what are you not a fan of?” She rolled her eyes. “Pointless conversations.” “And…”

“And loudmouths who want attention all the time.”

I ignored that. She just wanted to get under my skin so I’d leave her alone, but instead I pressed her some more. “Come on. Chestnutt and I shared our fears. And this is a team, right? Besides, if you don’t answer, I’ll sing that song Gum Baby likes to hum.”

Ayanna stiffened.

I cleared my throat and hummed a few bars. Ayanna flinched and shot me a death glare. Chestnutt waited for her to answer, too, and finally the pilot threw one hand up in the air.

“All right, fine!” Ayanna shook her head at both of us and then turned to keep an eye on our flight. “Surprises. I don’t like surprises.”

“Like preshents?” Chestnutt asked.

“No, like…I don’t know. Like people jumping out at me.”

“Ambushes,” I said quietly. “You don’t like being ambushed.”

She stayed silent, and I started to ask another question, when one of the supply bags began to rustle, scaring me half to death. Ayanna jerked back and the raft wobbled, and my stomach flipped.

“Fetterling!” I shouted, ready to kick the whole bag overboard.
The bag shifted, then lifted, and a face emerged.

# 22
# LEGEND OF THE BOTTLE ROCKET

**“FETTERLING?” THE VOICE THAT CAME** from the bag was muffled, but there was no mistaking that high-pitched voice. “Where? Gum Baby need to work off some energy anyway.”

“Gum Baby!” Ayanna shouted. “What are you doing here?”

A lumpy leather-wrapped bundle stood up in the middle of the supplies. Two short, stubby legs poked out from the bottom, and the weird creature stomped indignantly out to the middle of the raft.

“What’s Gum Baby doing here? *What’s Gum Baby doing here?* Being insulted. How dare you leave on a mission without Gum Baby! That’s like leaving sand out of a sandwich. Or toes out of tomatoes. Or—”

“Okay,” Ayanna interrupted. “First of all, none of that makes any sense.”

“You put sand in sandwiches?” Chestnutt whispered, and I shook my head.

“Second of all,” Ayanna continued, “we’re over here.”

Gum Baby was standing in front of a sack of carrots Chestnutt had brought along. The leather bundle stuck to the doll’s face swiveled left and right. Then, with a grunt and some pulling and a whole lotta sap, off it popped. Her curly hair stood straight up, and she wore miniature overalls

that were rumpled. They'd been dyed black, and she had two black feathers glued to her back. It almost looked like…

"Are you…dressed like Miss Rose?" Chestnutt asked.

That was it! The black outfit, the feathers…. Gum Baby had a new mentor, it seemed.

"No," Gum Baby said. "Just thought feathers made Gum Baby look fierce." She struck a pose, flexing her biceps and shaking her back so the feathers wiggled.

Chestnutt, Ayanna, and I looked at each other and tried not to smile.

"Okay," Ayanna said, "but what are you doing here? I thought you were on kitchen duty."

Gum Baby sank to the floor of the raft and fiddled with the empty supply sack. "Gum Baby thought if she got another chance, she could prove she could be a part of the team."

Ayanna's face softened. She bit her lip, then sighed. "You can't just insert yourself, Gum Baby. You have to give it some time. Miss Rose and Miss Sarah and the others will come around. But sneaking off on a mission you're not supposed to be on isn't going to help. You know that."

Gum Baby slumped even lower. Any farther and her face would be on the floor.

"What does she want to do?" I whispered to Chestnutt.

At least I thought I had whispered. Ayanna looked up with a frown. What had I said wrong this time?

"She wants to be a pilot," Chestnutt answered. "Like Ayanna."

Gum Baby sighed and stared at her wooden hands, then reached behind and pulled the feathers from her back. She crumpled them and tossed them away, then drew her little knees up to her chest.

"Gum Baby thought she could do it. Go on adventures, find others, lead them home and be a hero, yay. Gum Baby worked so hard. She trained. She studied. She thought she was ready. Gum Baby begged and pleaded. But no, they said. She was too small, or too sticky."

We all watched her—even Ayanna turned toward her. It wasn't normal to see Gum Baby like this. She was always energetic, never sad.

I thought *I* was the sad one.

Turns out other people—even dolls, I guess—have issues, too.

"What happened?" I asked.

She looked at me. “Finally, after Gum Baby stuck herself behind John Henry’s ear and whispered for a few days, they agreed to give Gum Baby a test. Said if she passed, Gum Baby could go on a ’frobation as a pilot.” She patted her curls and sighed. “Even had Miss Rose work on the hair.”

I winced. “You mean…*pro*bation, right?”

Gum Baby’s eyes grew wide, then she dropped her face into her hands and started wailing. “Gum Baby got this ’fro for nothing? Do you know how hard it is to get sap out of an afro? Do you? DO YOU?”

Chestnutt patted her on the back as Ayanna gave me an exasperated look.

I raised my hands defensively. “I’m sorry! I just thought she should know!”

“You could’ve said it later,” she muttered.

After a few moments Gum Baby calmed down and sniffled. I handed her a paper towel and she blew her nose. Have you ever seen a doll full of sap blow her nose? Um…trust me, you don’t want to.

“So, Gum Baby,” Chestnutt said, trying to change the subject, “what mission did they send you on? How’d you do?”

Gum Baby shrugged. “Ask him,” she said, pointing at me. “He was there, too.”

“What?” I said. “What did I do?”

Gum Baby sniffled again. “You didn’t let Gum Baby have the book!” I gawped in disbelief. “You’re mad because I didn’t let you *steal* my best friend’s journal? You’re the whole reason I’m stuck here!”

“No, *you’re* the reason you’re here. Nobody told your big head to chase Gum Baby. You could’ve let her have it. You were just being selfish.”

“Of all the—I mean, how—? I can’t even begin—” I spluttered in frustration. Chestnutt and Ayanna looked back and forth between the two of us.

“I never heard the full story,” Ayanna said thoughtfully. “How *did* you and Gum Baby end up destroying the lives of everyone in MidPass and possibly Alke as well?” I winced, and she shrugged. “I call it as I see it.”

Chestnutt hopped up and down. “Oh, a story, a story!”

Gum Baby started jumping up and down as well, and I wrinkled my forehead at her. “You know the story. You were in it.”

“Gum Baby just likes stories,” she said.

“Well, I’m not telling one.”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why?” Ayanna said, and she grinned when I rolled my eyes.

“Because weird things happen when I tell stories, remember?” “Mm-hmm. But you’re an Anansesem, right? Isn’t that what Brer and John Henry and Miss Rose said? You’re supposed to be superspecial when it comes to telling stories. Are you saying you’re really not that special after all?” She smiled and raised her eyebrows.

I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore her.

“So…you’re not going to tell a story?” Chestnutt’s voice sounded smaller than normal. When I looked up, both she and Gum Baby looked disappointed.

I sighed. Maybe nothing bad would come of it. And if it did, well, then at least I’d be diverting iron monsters from the Thicket. Yeah. I’d be doing the gods a favor….

To be honest, I *did* want to try out the Anansesem powers again, just so I could get into the rhythm of telling stories to groups of people. If was going to help, I needed to practice.

“Fine. I’ll tell a story—but not the one about how I met Gum Baby. I saw what happened when I talked about that.”

“Oh? Then what *are* you going to share with the class today?” Ayanna pitched the raft upward slightly and we popped into clear sky. The cloudbank drifted beneath and we floated on a sea of white.

I stuck my tongue out at Ayanna before turning to Chestnutt and Gum Baby, racking my brain. What story would be safe to tell?

Another pocket of mist and clouds drifted up past the raft and over our heads. Chestnutt giggled as a white sphere settled between the tips of her ears, then yelped as Gum Baby popped it.

I could feel a rhythm in the raft.

More cloud bubbles rose, floated around us, and burst into joy. Laughter and shouts. I heard children calling and playing.

I grinned.

“Okay,” I said in a loud voice, clapping my hands. I could sense energy in them, like when I made the butterflies tell the story in the Thicket glade. It was still a bit strange, but the feeling was lighter this time, less like needles and more like a buzzing.

Everyone looked at me, then settled down and waited. Even Ayanna seemed curious.

*“One time, Eddie and I made our own super soda.”*

The rhythm was in my fingertips now. It felt like I could shape the story, work the words like clay and sculpt a tale for everyone to see.

“It started as a dare. A prank, really.”

The story materialized with little effort this time. Maybe because I wasn’t angry or threatened. Either way, everyone on the raft oohed and aahed as the bubbles of mist surrounding us swirled and stretched into a diorama. Two cloud boys—one slightly larger than the other—crept into a large nimbus of a building. We entered, too, and watched the mischievous boys as they laughed and huddled together in a fluffy white cafeteria.

I felt a tug of sadness—I’d nearly forgotten this memory.

“Our heroes thought they were alone in the building. It was a Saturday, nobody was at the school, and the lights were off. Little did they know…” A tall woman with silver-stratus dreadlocks and wearing a cirrus-cloud dress marched down the hallway to the cafeteria. The larger boy didn’t hear her—he was buried in chemistry, mixing sparkling water and food coloring and fizzy candy in six different sports bottles, and his back was to the door. At the last second, the smaller boy sounded the alarm—someone was coming! The boys hid, their delicious project perched precariously on the edge of a tabletop. The bottles started bubbling, gently at first, but then they began to shake faster and faster until the whole table jitterbugged.

The woman, with a cumulonimbus frown that grew darker and darker, investigated the commotion. While her back was turned, the boys snuck out, their little legs churning and kicking up puffs behind them.

I closed my eyes, remembering the breathless laughter, the whispers, the anticipation. I could hear Eddie hissing at me to slow down and wait for him, feel my ribs splitting with laughter as I ran.

I didn’t have to open my eyes to see what happened next. It unfolded in my mind.

The soda bottles launched into the air and sent sweet suds bursting out of every window in the cafeteria, and one bottle zoomed down the hallway and out the front door. Kids playing blocks away said they saw it whiz by, and legend has it that people fighting in the burger joint parking lot stopped to watch. By the time all the soda had fizzed out, the two sides couldn’t remember what they’d been fighting over.

When I opened my eyes, a cloud bottle streamed across the sky. Chestnutt, Gum Baby, and even Ayanna watched it. It flew toward us,

soaring just above the raft before bursting into twinkling vapor and misty streamers.

But my attention stayed on the diorama. On the two boys and the way the smaller one clapped the larger one on the shoulder. Even if no one else could hear them, the words he spoke still rang clear in my mind.

*I got your back.*

A flare of anger spiked through me.

Eddie wasn't around anymore. He couldn't have my back. He wasn't there to get me in trouble, or get me out of trouble, or do anything. The memory was just a reminder of something that could never be again.

"Hey, what happened?"

Chestnutt's voice broke through my thoughts. I realized that the diorama had frozen—the boys were in mid-stride. I struggled to recapture the rhythm, to get the feeling of creation in my fingers, but the anger had disrupted everything.

"Nothing," I said.

"Is that it? Did they get away?" Gum Baby hopped up and down in frustration. "You can't leave Gum Baby hanging like this. Stupid cloud people! Never can tell with them."

Ayanna studied me. "You okay?"

I didn't answer. The drumming had stopped, and my old anger and resentment had returned. But this time, the tingling remained in my fingertips, like that sticky feeling you can never get rid of after touching honey or syrup.

Just to see what would happen, I conjured an image of Eddie in my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut, reached out toward the mist, and tried to bring the little cloud boy back.

Nothing.

I let my hands drop in disappointment.

*Concentrate on what you're speaking about, and learn control.*

Miss Sarah's words echoed in my ear, and I frowned. Concentrate and control….

I hesitated, then reached out again. This time I kept my eyes open, and I whispered to myself, *"Once I had a brother and friend…."*

My fingers buzzed, and then the small boy made of mist and mischief climbed out of the clouds.

I smiled.

“Heads up, everyone,” Ayanna called. The solemn expression on her face wiped the smile off mine. “We’re here.”

Gum Baby rushed to the edge of the raft. Chestnutt and I stayed put. My stomach flopped as we tilted. Ayanna, steering from the rear, nodded toward the front.

“Go look,” she said.

I shook my head. “I’m good right here.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Trust me, this is the best view you’ll ever see.” She studied my expression, then raised an eyebrow. “Wow, you weren’t kidding about your fear of heights, huh?”

I hesitated, then gave her a few short, jerky nods and waited for her to laugh at me. But she didn’t say anything else. She just turned back to her glowing staff, made minute adjustments, and stared at the mist like a psychic reading tea leaves.

As we descended, Gum Baby rejoined Chestnutt and they whispered excitedly to each other.

“Last chance, flyboy!” Ayanna called. She didn’t turn around. “If you miss this, you’ll never forgive yourself.”

“If I fall, I won’t forgive myself,” I muttered.

But as I spoke, the mist took on a golden sparkle, as if the bottom of the clouds had been dipped in glitter. Pinpricks of light speared up from the ground like miniature searchlights guiding us in for a landing. The raft swam in a golden pond for several seconds. Chestnutt started hopping back and forth—so fast that Gum Baby had to tell her to settle down.

“Calm down, bunny, this ain’t hopscotch!”

The anticipation was contagious, and my curiosity eventually outweighed my allergy to plunging to my death. Barely.

I scooted to the rear edge on the seat of my pants, ignoring Ayanna’s mocking look as I eased up next to her.

“About time,” she said.

“View better be worth it,” I grumbled.

She snorted. “Oh, it will be. And when we land, you gonna apologize for doubting me.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.

But as I spoke, the final remains of the glitter-dusted clouds faded, and my jaw dropped so far I thought I’d have to duct-tape it back to my face.

“Holy—”

“We’re here!” Gum Baby and Chestnutt shouted.

Ayanna smirked.

“Welcome to the Golden Crescent,” she said.

# 23
# THE GOLDEN CRESCENT

**WATER AS BLUE AS A** summer sky stretched beneath us, and giant ships dotted the sea. Yachts and super-yachts. Ocean liners and huge oval hoverships with domes that sparkled and rippled like bubbles in the sun— every single one of them large enough to make the *Titanic* blush. Ruby-red symbols on their sides blazed when the sunlight reflected off them, but they were too dazzling to make out.

And that was just the driveway.

"Are those palaces?" I asked. My voice came out in a whisper, as if I didn't want to interrupt the painter who was creating the scene below.

"Yep." Ayanna's voice sounded grim for some reason, but I didn't ask why. I stared greedily, drinking in the glamorous world we were descending into.

The Golden Crescent wasn't a place. It was a spectacle. The coastal city was shaped like an arc that grew thinner on both ends until the tips stabbed into the sea. Two pearl lighthouses with massive crystals on their tops stood at the end of each crescent point.

Dark mountains rose out of the horizon—angry, sharp peaks that chewed at the sky, a mouth threatening to devour the glistening jewel in front of it.

And I mean, this town glistened.

Rose-gold sand met the turquoise sea in a clash of vibrant fury. In the distance, near the city center, spires of midnight black and dream silver stood proudly next to ivory domes and marble castles. Massive homes, bigger than any mansion I'd seen along Lakeshore Drive at home—bigger, in fact, than the museums we traveled to on field trips—lined city streets so wide you could play football from curb to jewel-encrusted curb.

The streets curved up and around as the ground rose away from the coast like a spiral. And there, at the top of a hill, the grandest palace of all awaited.

We angled down toward a giant marina, where more yachts of weird shapes and sizes floated. One had two stories, like a double-decker bus, except the windows were see-through bubbles. Inside, a waterfall splashed in a grotto, while a spiraling waterslide connected it to the bottom level, where a miniature beach awaited.

"That's so cool," I said as we passed it. "If I had that, I'd never leave Lake Michigan."

A winding road led from the marina to a huge square of polished marble, and that's where Ayanna steered the raft. More symbols, like those painted on the sides of the ships, were carved into the ground. I gulped as I recognized one—an adinkra, the same as on my bracelet, and on Eddie's journal.

The raft settled down in the middle of the landing space with a gentle bump.

"Let's go," Gum Baby said, but Ayanna shook her head.

"Not yet."

"But—"

"We're not dashing off anywhere. You could get lost, or something even worse might happen."

Ayanna passed out gear as we waited, and I raised my eyebrows as Gum Baby scampered behind a pile of supplies. Ayanna nudged my arm and handed me an empty satchel.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"For the Story Box. I'm not carrying that thing."

I crossed my arms. "Oh, so *I* have to carry the stolen goods? Nice. Real nice."

"Well, Gum Baby ain't doing it, Bumbletongue," the doll said, popping back into view, "so don't even fix your mouth to suggest it."

I began to snap at the little loudmouth but stopped when I saw what she was wearing.

Ayanna noticed it at the same time. “Um, GB…”

“What?” Gum Baby was now in a black cape over tiny black pants and a thin black blouse. Her hair was pulled back in a tiny bun, and she posed dramatically with the cape extended.

“Don’t let Gum Baby scare you,” she said. “It’s just for stealth. Gum Baby gonna be the wind. No, lightning! Wait, is lightning stealthy? Wind makes a *whoosh* sound, but lightning sorta cracks, don’t it? Yeah, Gum Baby is wind lightning. Gonna *whoosh-crack* all over the place.”

She ran around the raft making *whoosh* sounds, and I sighed. Chestnutt stood on her hind paws and dropped the pencil she had been using to sketch on the raft. “Okay, I’m ready.”

A map of the city covered the wooden planks, and I whistled silently at the amount of detail Chestnutt had managed to fit in. Palace-lined streets, parks and fountains, spires and towers—all were labeled in neat and legible handwriting. Arrows pointed toward one palace, larger than all the others, so large it took up half the map, and I gulped.

This was becoming too real.

We actually planned on stealing a god’s treasure. Nyame, the sky god. The one who first created stories, and who’d awarded them to Anansi after the Weaver had completed three seemingly insurmountable tasks.

I rubbed my forehead and took a deep breath. Man oh man.

Ayanna slipped on her backpack, then stepped on Gum Baby’s cape to stop her zooming. Ayanna wagged a finger at her and said, “Hush. Time to plan our attack.”

Chestnutt looked at each of us and twitched her nose. “Okay, listen up. This is how it’s going to go….”

The plan went down the drain fifteen minutes in. Our group split up, with each pair taking one of the two main avenues leading to Nyame’s estate. I got partnered with Gum Baby.

Typical.

Instead of creeping stealthily down an unfamiliar street surrounded by unfamiliar buildings while trying to steal the most valuable treasure in an unfamiliar city, guess what I was doing?

Yep.

Arguing with a ten-inch doll.

"No, you cannot leave a sap trail!" I hissed as she moped behind me. "Now come on."

"But what if monsters chase us through the city and we need to find our way back? Huh? What then? You ain't heard of precoffinary measures?"

"First off, it's *precautionary* measures—"

"First off, sap attack, Gum Baby know the phrase, but if you don't wanna die, it's precoffinary. Fool. Gum Baby know what words she wanna use."

I gritted my teeth and wiped off the ball of sap she'd flung at my face. "Just…come on. We're almost there."

We walked up a slight hill, following a simple map Chestnutt had drawn on a scrap of paper. We'd passed several palaces, each grander and more luxurious than the last. But it was all very eerie.

The streets were deserted.

No people poked their heads out of their massive homes to investigate the intruders.

No kids ran along the streets playing with their friends.

No gossip or chatter or movement in the streets or market-day traffic or block party or any other community-based event. Nothing.

Gum Baby's voice broke the silence. "Hey, look at this."

She had climbed the stairs to a vine-covered palace across the street and stood peeking through the towering front gate. A small copper statue of a girl stood on a tiny ivory column, both hands frozen on her hips. I know it didn't make sense, but I felt eyes on me as I walked up the steps, and I looked over my shoulder uneasily.

"Gum Baby," I said, from several feet away, "I don't think we should —"

"Too late," she announced loudly, and she rapped the base of the statue. "You too scared, Bumbletongue."

"WHO GOES THERE?"

Gum Baby squeaked, scrambled up the statue, and hastily clapped a sticky hand over its mouth, shushing the indignant copper girl doorbell.

"*Shh!* Sap attack! You gonna get us in trouble. Two sap attacks!"

The statue seemed to glare at us from behind a layer of sap covering her face.

“Gum Baby, get down from there,” I stage-whispered.

She flapped a hand at me, sending sticky drops of sap everywhere. “Come over here,” she said impatiently.

I growled something I probably wouldn’t say anywhere near Nana and stalked up the rest of the steps. Two more statues posed on either side of the gate, and they made my neck itch—I felt like they were watching me trespass. I crouched down beside Gum Baby and tried not to gawk at the size of everything around me. The entry arches, which stood as tall as John Henry, were copper trees with silhouettes of tiny people in motion on the top.

“Look.” Gum Baby pointed beyond the arches to a courtyard, where there was a small grove of real trees. A monstrous sycamore stood in the middle, so large that it shaded the entire grounds.

I cocked my ear. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Faint whistling sounded from deep within the tiny forest. A lot of whistling. It was like birds calling back and forth and then joining together in a loud, trilling chorus.

“That,” I said.

Gum Baby shook her head. “Nope. Clean your ears, Bumbletongue, and maybe that’ll fix it.”

The whistling grew louder and closer, and I licked my lips nervously. “Something’s coming.”

Then Gum Baby did look around uneasily. “What

is it?” “I don’t know—maybe we should go.”

“Don’t worry, Gum Baby will protect you.” But as she said that, she tried to hide behind my legs.

I was already backing away. That forest felt ancient. Neither good nor bad—but powerful. I wanted no part of that right now, not with everything else that was going on. My feet were turning to the street on their own, and who was I to stop them?

My name was Tristan Nope-I’m-Gone.

“Bumbletongue, quit being such a scaredy-cat! Bumbletongue! Ooh, Gum Baby gonna get you! Don’t you leave Gum Baby alone in here!”

We met up with Ayanna and Chestnutt at a giant plaza filled with fountains disguised as statues, and flowering bushes shaped to look like animals. Gum Baby was still fuming, but I felt nothing except relief. A boy can only take so much.

The air was filled with the aroma of springtime, and if it weren't for the overwhelming silence, it would've been peaceful. Our footsteps echoed as we met in the middle of the open space.

"Guess we didn't need to split up," Ayanna admitted.

I'd like to say a smug smile didn't appear on my face, but you take the wins you can get.

"Finished marking the trail back to the plaza," Chestnutt said. "Just in case we're chased and get lost."

"Oh, did you?" Gum Baby said in an extra loud voice. "Would you call those…*precoffinary measures*?"

Chestnutt paused, then started to giggle. "Yup, yup, I guess I would." I could feel Gum Baby's eyes lasering the back of my head. "Okay, so what's next?" I asked, trying to move on quickly.

"That's the entrance to Nyame's estate over there," Chestnutt said, flicking her ears toward the far end of the plaza, where two towering marble pillars marked an exit. Between them—

"Do y'all see that?" Gum Baby asked.

"It's a gate," Ayanna said.

"Gum Baby knows what a gate looks like. She's very familiar with them. *That* ain't no gate."

"It's Nyame's gate," Chestnutt said. "And that's where we're heading."

Between the pillars, the air shimmered, gold flecks occasionally winking into existence like jeweled fireflies. The palace grounds beyond looked distorted, as if we were peering through frosted glass.

We stopped in front of the pillars. Ayanna looked at me, and I rolled my eyes and sighed.

Leadership is tough, man.

I hefted the empty satchel around my shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped through the twinkling gate.

# 24
# NYAME'S PALACE

**NYAME'S PALACE GROUNDS BLEW MY** mind.

My brain was toast—burnt toast that your mom scrapes so you can still try to eat it for breakfast, but there is no saving it.

"That is one giant driveway," I said.

The paved road in front of us, lined with glittering ivory bricks on one side and edged with golden stones on the other, curved around ripe orchards stuffed with fruit trees I never knew existed. It skipped over hills greener than fresh twenty-dollar bills.

Sunlight splashed in from overhead, bright without being too glaring, and my tension drained away. A gentle breeze carried the smell of spring turned to summer—fresh-cut grass, the ocean, and wildflowers newly bloomed.

"This place is incredible," Chestnutt whispered.

Ayanna nodded but kept her eyes on a swivel. Always the pilot. Her eyes met mine and we exchanged a look of disbelief. This paradise felt too good to be true.

Gum Baby ran up a slight hill before the rest of us and froze.

"What is it?" I asked, following.

Gum Baby shook her head and backed up. My fists clenched and Ayanna reached for the staff slung across her back. Chestnutt dropped behind us as we crested the hill.

Everything we'd seen so far had been impressive. Clearly the palace estate had been designed to draw in visitors and astound them with the splendor and glory of the Golden Crescent. Nyame knew how to wow a crowd.

But after those appetizers came the main course.

Massive statues of people I didn't recognize lined the path leading to an enormous golden domed palace. Some pointed at the horizon, or lifted children high into the air, and others carried spears and shields. The closest one was a woman with a stern face and a golden stool under one arm.

As we walked by, I swear her eyes followed us.

Ayanna raised an eyebrow as I quickened my pace, but she didn't comment. Nobody wanted to talk near these statues that seemed to be watching our every move, so silence fell over us until we reached the entrance to Nyame's palace.

And what an entrance it was.

"A waterfall," I mumbled to no one in particular. "The entry is a waterfall. What is with this city and its weird front doors?"

The doorway, which looked large enough for one of the statues to walk through, was framed with stone that had been carved with symbols—more adinkra. A curtain of water streamed out of a slit on the top, falling in a perfect sheet like a single pane of glass, and the same winking flecks of gold from the front gate appeared here. I couldn't see inside.

I took a step forward, and a seam appeared in the middle of the waterfall.

"Wait, wait," Ayanna whispered. "What is that?"

"I don't know," I said. I took another step and the seam widened at the bottom, like a curtain being drawn at the start of a play. "I think it has a motion sensor? Alkean smart-home technology. Who'd a thunk it?"

Ayanna rolled her eyes. "Just be careful, flyboy. You're our ticket out of here."

"I'm touched by your concern."

"Gum Baby gonna touch up your chin if you don't get a move on." The little loudmouth used my legs as cover, peeking out from one before diving behind the other.

"Okay, okay." I scooted closer and the seam in the waterfall opened even farther, so I could peek through and check the ground ahead. No

immediate sign of a trap. *I can do this*, I thought. I took a deep breath and leaped through the doorway with a holler.

"HAH!"

Nobody jumped out at me. No monsters, no weird statues, nothing. Instead, I stood in a massive rectangular room—an audience chamber, from the looks of it. Polished marble floors reflected the golden plaques hanging from the walls.

Gum Baby came in behind me. "Where's the ceiling?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

White marble pillars towered over us. They ended high above where the ceiling should have been, as if they held up the sky. Each had an image of life in the Golden Crescent painted on it—families sailing in the bay, children playing in the palace gardens, men and women in formal dress in this very hall. All of them with deep brown skin like mine. All of them happy.

None of them anywhere to be found in real life.

The pillars lined both sides like sentinels all the way to other end, a full football field away, where a statue sat on a golden throne. More waterfalls spilled out of holes in the walls, and they splashed into oval pools as blue as the sky. Silver lily pads with ruby-red flowers floated on the surface of the water.

Everything looked so…

"Beautiful," I said out loud. Ayanna, who had entered after Chestnutt, moved to my side. "Where are they?" I asked her. "Where did all the people go?"

"Brer said the Golden Crescent was the first to be ravaged by the iron monsters," she responded. "Maybe they're all in hiding. Or…"

She didn't finish, but she didn't have to.

Maybe they'd all been taken.

"Hey, these statues are different."

Gum Baby's voice echoed from the other end of the hall. She stood near the statue on the throne, her silly cape fluttering in a gentle cross breeze, and pointed at the two figures flanking it—one of a large leopard in mid-leap, the other of a python lashing forward. I joined her in examining them. Both looked so fierce, so lifelike, that I could almost hear their snarls and hisses.

"Freaky," I mumbled.

I moved closer to the throne, eager to get away from those creatures. The statue in the huge chair was just as detailed—a man staring straight ahead, his hands gripping the armrests, with bracelets on his wrists and anklets above his bare feet. His head was balding, and around the detailed crown of curls, he wore a circlet studded with large jeweled insects.

I could feel it again—that weird energy, like an electric bass line trying to get out of my skin. The waterfalls splashed in time, keeping the beat. There was a story here, somewhere, itching to be told.

My eyes fell to a circle in the floor right in front of the throne. "Hey now. What's this?"

The others crowded around as I dropped into a squat and stared at faint indentations that were covered with sandy-brown dust. I blew gently across the surface, then leaned back in satisfaction.

"It's a door," Ayanna breathed.

"Do you think—?"

"It has to be."

Could the Story Box really be under there? This was almost too easy.

I looked for a latch I could pull to lift the circular trapdoor, but there wasn't one. We had nothing to pry it open with, either.

Ayanna turned to me. "Remember what Brer said? When the Anansesem tells a story—"

"It will be drawn to the Story Box."

"And vice versa," said Ayanna.

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well?"

"Um, right." Story, story. Needed a story. I could hear the faint rhythmic beating in the background. But what story would be appropriate for summoning a magical treasure chest?

My eyes flitted around the chamber, seeking inspiration. Finally they landed on the figure seated on the throne. An old man, almost larger-than-life, presiding over the room like a king. Or a god…

"I got it," I said.

"'Bout time," Gum Baby grumbled.

Ayanna shushed her and motioned for me to continue. Chestnutt hopped closer.

*Concentrate on what you're speaking about….*

I took a deep breath, stared at the circle in the floor, then began to talk slowly, shaping the story with my hands as the words gave it form.

*“What if I told you stories didn’t always exist?”*

The light in the room faded. The grooves of the trapdoor began to glow, illuminating our faces. Sand swirled gently as I spoke, spinning into pillars, walls, and waterfalls, until a small replica of the throne room appeared in front of us.

“Once, Nyame, the sky god, owned all stories. He kept them in a magnificent chest, woven from light and dreams. He kept them in…his Story Box.”

I twirled my fingers, and a small figure stepped out of the whirling sand and took his place on the miniature throne. He pointed at the floor, and the circular door slid open. A glimmering chest rose into the air, spinning slowly and opening to reveal an emerald-green glow.

The same glow that had come from Eddie’s journal.

“But Kwaku Anansi, the spider god, wanted—”

A scraping sound interrupted me. At first I thought Gum Baby had fallen, but…no, there she was, sitting on my foot and staring intently at the sand.

The scrape came again.

This time Ayanna heard it, too. She frowned and looked around. “What was—?”

A groan filled the hall, and every muscle in my body locked up. Dust fell off the three statues—the leopard, the snake, and the god on the throne. The bracelets on his wrists and ankles jangled.

The statue’s head swiveled in my direction. Its eyes narrowed in anger, and a booming voice echoed in my skull.

*LEAVE!*

# 25
# THAT WAS NO STATUE

**I STAGGERED BACK. THE VOICE** had sounded loud enough to shatter stone, and yet no one else looked concerned.

"Everything okay?" Ayanna asked.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Gum Baby and Chestnutt paid me no attention—they were still fascinated by the whirling sand story. Ayanna cocked her head, but before I could try to speak to her again, the booming voice echoed.

*They cannot hear. But you can. Why? Why are you here?*

I gulped and turned to the statue on the throne. Dust and sand blew off of it in spiraling streams to reveal…

"Gaaaaah," I spluttered.

That was no statue.

Brown skin. Fuzzy graying hair. Piercing brown eyes flecked with gold. A chain necklace with a symbol I'd seen before. Not Anansi's symbol, but another adinkra even more familiar. Nana used to knit it into her quilts all the time.

"N-n-nah," I stuttered. "It's…You're…"

*Speak! Have you come to torment me further? Does your master need more of my pain? Were my people, my heart, my home not enough?*

I licked my lips. This was going all wrong. One, Nyame wasn't supposed to be here. It was just an in-and-out mission. Grab the Story Box and go. No one had said anything about having to convince an angry god you weren't here to destroy his culture.

Two, how do you address the sky god?

"Your Honor—"

That didn't seem right.

"I'm not here to hurt you."

*LIES!*

I staggered back from the verbal assault. Ayanna grabbed my arm before I could fall.

"Tristan? Are you okay? Who are you talking to?" I shook my head at her. One conversation at a time.

"My Lord, we're here—" I broke off. What could I tell him? We were here to steal from him? That much was true, no matter how worthy our cause might have been.

Nyame swiveled his head, and this time Ayanna noticed. "By the wings," she said in a breathless whisper. "Is that—?"

*Take what you will, usurper, but your time will come. You cannot hold us here forever.*

I blinked. Who was this "us" he spoke of? For the first time, I took a longer look at the two statues on either side of the throne. The lifelike leopard and python…Could it be? Were they—?

Ayanna had stumbled back, clutching her head in pain, but now she moved forward again, nearly collapsing against my shoulder, and pointed. "The…bracelets!"

I followed her finger and my hands curled into fists.

Of course.

Nyame's bracelets and anklets were fully visible now. They weren't made out of gold, like most of the Golden Crescent's beautiful creations. They were made of iron and connected to—

"Fetterlings," I said in a growl.

The iron monsters behind the throne were unanimated and camouflaged to look like part of the statues. They were bigger than the bossling in MidPass, but still I wondered how they had managed to overcome Nyame.

"How can they hold back the sky god?" I whispered to Ayanna.

“I don’t know, but—Look! The crown!” She pointed to Nyame’s circlet, and at first I didn’t notice anything unusual.

“What?”

“Just wait…. There, did you see it?”

I did. “The jeweled butterflies. They’re moving, flapping their wings, right?”

“I don’t think those are butterflies.”

The trace of fear in her voice sent a shiver through me.

“Ayanna—”

“Those are brand flies, Tristan.”

“Wait, what?”

“They’re poisoning him. He’s too powerful to be killed by their stings, but their poison is keeping him paralyzed. He couldn’t do anything when they came and took his people. He could only watch.” Ayanna was on the verge of tears, and, seeing the brand flies pressing against Nyame’s forehead, I could understand why.

Can you imagine being forced to watch as the people you loved and protected were hunted down and dragged away, never to be seen again?

A tear welled up in my eye, too.

Anger welled up in my heart.

“Not anymore, they aren’t.”

The rhythm inside the hall got louder and faster. It swelled into a thumping beat that sent needle pricks down my arms, like they were recovering from falling asleep. My little story reenactment stopped, the sandy scene falling to the floor.

“Hey!” Gum Baby protested, before realizing that something else was going on. But I ignored her.

Finally, something I’d learned in this world was going to come in handy. I

stalked up the three steps to the throne. Nyame’s eyes glittered with rage, and beneath that, pain.

I lifted my chin. “I’ve come to help, Sky God.”

He scowled. *Have you not done enough?*

*Not yet*, I thought. It was time for a bigger, louder story.

I drove my right fist into the palm of my left hand. *“What if I told you, Nyame, that you gave Kwaku Anansi your stories after he did the impossible?”*

I willed that story into the throne room. Nana loved telling it, and it was the first one Eddie had written in the journal. Grains of golden sand and dust bounced on the floor before rising and swirling in the air. The waterfalls on the walls stopped flowing into the pools—instead, droplets began flowing upward, sparkling like diamonds as they joined the story above our heads.

"Anansi visited the sky god and asked to buy his Story Box, with all the stories inside. Nyame, humoring him, agreed. But only if Anansi brought him Leopard, Python, and one of the Mmoatia, the forest spirits."

Out of the whirling sand and water drops a scene appeared. Anansi— sometimes a smiling man, other times a large spider—strolled through a forest. He stopped in front of a tree, where a giant leopard slept in the branches. He bowed, and the leopard raised its head, then hopped down. Anansi pointed at a pile of leaves beneath the tree, and when Leopard prowled over them, the great cat fell into a hidden trap.

"Anansi tricked Leopard, then brought him to you, Sky God. But he wasn't done."

As I spoke and pulled the story out of the sand, I kept an eye on the giant fetterlings. Their chains began to rattle.

Anansi continued to walk through the forest, this time carrying a long staff. He stopped at a giant boulder beside the trail, where Python lay in the sun. Anansi bowed, then studied the snake and the wooden pole, comparing the two. He shook his head, saying *Surely the staff was longer?* Python hissed, insulted. His length was his pride, and no mere walking stick was more impressive than he! Anansi looked unsure but laid his staff on the ground. Python flicked his tongue out, slithered off the rock, and stretched out beside the pole. Quick as a flash, Anansi tied the great snake to the staff and carried it away.

"Anansi tricked Python, then brought him to Nyame. But he wasn't done."

Now the bosslings were clearly agitated. Their chains lashed like angry snakes. The brand flies buzzed in irritation, and a few peeled off from the sky god's head like wet leaves and fluttered weakly to the ground. Ayanna dashed forward and hammered them with her staff.

Nyame turned his head. *What are you doing? Your actions confuse me, usurper.*

I ignored him. I was starting to understand.

Iron monsters didn't just react to stories about them. They reacted to stories, period.

When I told a tale, something pulled at the creatures. The knowledge, the history, the culture—it drew them like magnets. Tell a story, or, if you were an Anansesem like me, bring a story to life in their presence, and they'd drop whatever they were doing to get at it.

Now I just hoped the second part of my idea would work.

A series of loud clicks echoed around the throne room, and I swallowed. The bosslings released their grip on Nyame and shuddered. Four large iron monsters spread out in front of us.

No, six. Two more had disengaged from Leopard and Python and joined the group.

Nyame slumped down in the throne behind them. Leopard and Python collapsed to the ground.

Okay, yep, I really needed to start on the second part of my plan. "Tristan," Ayanna said. "What do we do now?"

She held Chestnutt, and Gum Baby scrambled up into my hoodie. Together we all backed up as the huge bosslings stalked forward. I eyed the story swirling in the air, felt the itch to continue in my palms, then took a quick glance behind me.

"Gum Baby, do you remember the statue that talked to you?" I asked.

She wriggled in my hood. "Gum Baby does not want to hear about that again. Why you always living in the past?"

I winced as two of the fetterlings squealed. "Well, I'm sorry, but times are hard. When I give the signal, everyone run back out and touch the first giant bronze statue you see. The big one, right in front."

Ayanna shook her head. "You want us to *what*?"

"Trust me. Just do it!"

"But—"

All six bosslings screeched, and they lunged forward. I severed my connection to the sand story above our heads and shoved everyone toward the entrance. "Go, go!"

# 26
# BRONZEY TO THE RESCUE

**A LOUD *WHUMP* SOUNDED BEHIND** us as the wet sand landed directly on the bosslings. They collapsed in a cacophony of grinding metal and shrieks as they struggled to extricate themselves.

"Nice," Gum Baby said, peeking out over my hood. "Gum Baby taught you some good strategy."

"Whatever," I said, gasping as we sprinted for the waterfall exit. "Just get ready."

"Get ready for what? Gum Baby staying right in here."

The seam in the waterfall opened, and we dashed out into the plaza. I headed for the path at the opposite end. Rumbling sounded from the palace behind us, and stone and water exploded outward as the stampede of bosslings burst into the sunlight. They quickly gained on us—we weren't going to make it.

*Desperate times call for desperate measures.*

I reached behind me. "Sorry," I said in advance.

"What? What are you—? Hey! Unhand Gum Baby! This ain't no party! Hey!"

I grabbed her out of my hood, aimed at the giant bronze woman in the courtyard, then threw the best spiral I'd ever tossed in my life. Like, fifty yards, easy. I should've played football. And I hate football.

Gum Baby soared through the air, shouting insults as she flew.

"You gonna regret this day, Bumbletongue! Gum Baby gonna kick your __"

*Splat!*

She landed just below the statue's knee and stuck there. Her little arms and legs flailed helplessly, but I couldn't watch her anymore.

"Tristan, look out!" Ayanna called.

I skidded to a stop as a bossling lunged in front of us. Ayanna moved next to me. She held a quivering Chestnutt in one hand and her glowing staff in the other. Iron monsters stalked around us, snapping their collars and screeching.

"What now?" Ayanna asked, but I didn't answer. "Tristan," she said again, almost pleading, "you have a plan, right?"

"Just wait," I said.

Chestnutt peeked up at me and I couldn't meet her eyes. If I was wrong…

All six bosslings shrieked at once, and one of them lunged forward, reaching for my throat.

A bronze foot the size of a compact car smashed it to pieces. Chestnutt screamed, and Ayanna brandished her staff, but I raised my hand. "Wait."

"But—"

"Look," I said, pointing.

The ground trembled as the giant bronze woman stepped down off her pedestal and twisted her foot, grinding the bossling into dust. The remaining iron monsters screeched at this new enemy, and they thundered past us to attack her.

Gum Baby straddled the statue's big toe like a horse and whooped with joy. "Stomp these fools, Bronzey! Look, that one's feeling froggy! Aha-ha-ha-ha, squish that chump. Yeeeeah. Y'all don't want none of this. Oh, where you going?"

She pointed at a bossling trying to sneak around the statue's foot. It looked like a mouse creeping around an elephant, and I grinned when the statue kicked it so hard it flew into the sky and disappeared.

"Aha-ha-ha-ha! Did y'all see that?" Gum Baby slapped her knee and howled with laughter. "Bronzey chucked that thing into the bratosphere!"

"You mean the *strato*sphere," I said, rolling my eyes.

“Yo, why you always correcting something? You Professor Bumbletongue or something?”

Ayanna kept a firm eye on the remaining bosslings. “Can you two put off the bickering until after we’re safe?”

The statue leaped high in the air, so high the sun framed her and gave her glaring angel wings.

*SMASH!*

When I opened my eyes, four oversize fetterlings were writhing beneath both of her heels, like roaches being smooshed on a kitchen floor. She twisted her heels again, then took two ground-shaking steps back.

I looked around. That was the last of them. “Well…I think we’re good now.”

Gum Baby peeked over the big toe and sucked her teeth at the sight of the defeated iron monsters. “Y’all should’ve been raised better,” she said to their remains. “Ain’t got no home training.”

“Kumi!” Nyame’s voice boomed out of the palace, and we all flinched. His voice wasn’t only in my head anymore. “Bring the usurpers to me.”

The bronze giant reached behind her back, pulled out a giant spear with a broad-leaved blade the size of a windshield, and leveled it at us.

Ayanna stared at me, and I cleared my throat. I’d thought we were safe.

Gum Baby crossed her legs and shook her head. “Y’all in trouble now.”

“You have come for the Story Box.”

It wasn’t a question. The four of us stood in front of the throne, where Nyame slouched to one side. It seemed the effect of the brand flies’ poison still lingered in the sky god’s system. Yet his eyes were alert. He gathered us all in his gaze, the gold flecks in his eyes glinting in the setting sun. Leopard and Python were curled on either side of him, staring at us with distrust.

“Yes,” I said.

“With the hope Anansi will aid you.”

I nodded.

“And you think I should help you…why? For your efforts just now? You have my thanks, but my support?” He shook his head.

“MidPass is dying, Lord Nyame,” Ayanna said. She still held Chestnutt in both arms. “The iron monsters are tearing our families apart.”

“The monsters tore my *country* apart!” Nyame accused.

“Yes, but—”

“They attacked my people. The monsters chased them and captured them and stripped them from their homes and lives and families!”

“Mr. Nyame—” Chestnutt squeaked, but the sky god’s words rolled right over her.

“The monsters took them off to die!”

His eyes flashed as he gripped the arms of his throne, daring us to speak. Ayanna bit her lip. Chestnutt buried her head in the crook of Ayanna’s elbow. Gum Baby hurled little balls of sap at Leopard’s tail as it swished in agitation.

This was getting us nowhere.

I ground my teeth, ignoring Nana’s warning that I’d wear them down to the gums eventually.

I knew what had to be done. I didn’t want to do it—not at all—but I had no reason to keep my secret anymore. When I revealed it, each word felt like a hot iron hook being ripped from my flesh.

“They’re not dead.”

Leopard’s tail went still. A ball of sap landed right on the tip. (“Got ’im!”) Ayanna turned and stared at me, and I did my best not to meet her eyes. They burned a hole in the side of my face, and I didn’t want to deal with that problem just yet.

“Not dead?” she hissed.

“Not dead?” Chestnutt asked, her ears flicking up in hope.

“Not dead?” Nyame whispered.

I sighed. *Out with it all, Tristan.* “I saw them. Before we left MidPass, I saw them, in a dream or a vision. They were alive inside…something.” Now I did look at Ayanna, and I flinched at the anger and the betrayal in her eyes.

Her nostrils flared and she shook her head. “You knew? This whole time, you knew?”

I winced. “I’m sorry, I—”

“No! You should’ve told me. You should’ve told *us*.”

“I wasn’t sure it was real, and I didn’t want to get your hopes up, and —”

I broke off, because no excuse was going to cut it. I had no right to decide what they were or weren’t capable of handling. Adults were always

doing that to me, and I hated it.

"I'm sorry. You're right, I should've told you—I should've told you all."

Ayanna shook her head and looked away as I notified the sky god about the visions I'd been having, the haint with the white flowers, the captured Alkeans and Midfolk in the walls.

Nyame drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. "You saw them in a dream? And I am supposed to believe this?"

I started to protest but stopped, surprised, when Ayanna beat me to it. "I believe him, Lord Nyame. He wouldn't lie, not about this." She glared at me. "If he says he saw it, then it's true. You have my word as a pilot."

"Hmph. The word of a pilot."

His fingers beat at a faster pace, and some of the sand began bouncing on the floor.

"And my Story Box will aid you in the fight against this ghost and the Maafa? It will free my people?"

"Yes…. At least, we think so," she answered. "If we have it, Anansi might come out of hiding and accept it as payment, since, you

know…" "He wanted it badly enough before," I finished.

"As in your story, Anansesem." Nyame watched me carefully. "But what do you mean by 'payment'? Payment for what?"

I straightened. "We need the Weaver to close the tear in the sky. If he does, it will cut off the iron monsters' power. Then we might stand a chance in defeating the Maafa once and for all."

My words spilled out of my mouth at a breathless pace, and we all clenched our fists and waited for the sky god's verdict. Nyame looked at Leopard, then at Python, before rubbing his forehead where the brand flies had been fastened.

Nyame's hand stopped, and then he waved toward the circle in the floor. "The Weaver is still in Alke. That I can assure you. Where he is, I don't know, and whether he will accept your bribe is another question. But go ahead, Anansesem…. Fulfill your mission."

I gaped in surprise. "For real?"

Nyame raised an eyebrow and I walked toward the trapdoor. I'd expected more resistance from him. I mean, we had originally intended to steal the Story Box, and now Nyame was just going to give it to us.

What were the odds?

The background rhythm of the story still beat in the throne room like a pulse. Once again I willed the sand to come to life above the circular door, and I barely had to pull the figure of Anansi into existence before the grooves in the floor blazed to life. The sound of stone grinding on stone echoed through the space, and the panel slid open. My friends and I gasped simultaneously.

A polished pedestal made of gold-tipped wood rose from beneath the floor. Detailed carvings decorated every inch. More adinkra—some I recognized, but many that I didn't. The panel closed under it and the pedestal settled gently on top.

Our gasps turned into groans.

Nyame waved his hands and a bitter smile crossed his face. "Tell me, did none of you think your plan too obvious?"

I squeezed my hands into fists so tight I may have drawn blood.

Ayanna bit her lip again.

Chestnutt buried her head in her paws and shivered, and Gum Baby's jaw dropped.

"You are not the first usurpers, nor the second. I am sorry, little ones, but you will need a new plan."

The pedestal was empty.

The Story Box was gone.

# 27
# NYAME'S CHARM

**“YOU KNEW ABOUT US,” I** said. “You knew, when we arrived, what our plans were.”

“I did,” said the sky god.

A whisper of wind brushed through the palace’s rooftop garden. Nyame stood in front of me, hands clasped behind his back, as he stared at the sun setting over the city. I was sorry my friends were missing out on the view, but the sky god had asked for a private consult with me.

Nyame had shifted to a normal size now—a bit shorter than Granddad—and he wore a cream-and-dark-brown-striped tunic and loose cream pants. If I didn’t know better—if the gold-flecked eyes didn’t brim with many millennia’s worth of knowledge—I’d swear he was just one of the chess-playing old heads at my apartment complex in Chicago.

“You used the statues,” I said. “You looked through their eyes.”

He nodded. “Yes. That is how I witnessed what happened to my people. If only I had foreseen what was to come, I might have been able to prevent it. To save at least some of them…”

“Some did get away,” I said. “They fled to MidPass. But now they and the Midfolk both face the same trouble there.”

Nyame glanced at me, and I swallowed at the intensity of his gaze. It was like being held in place by a huge magnet.

“The monsters still lurk here, too,” he said. “I’d hoped that their appetite would be sated by now, that my people could return…”

“But can’t you help them? You’re the all-powerful sky god. Can’t you defeat the Maa—er, you-know-what? Can’t you fix the tear?”

Nyame sank down on a stone bench and put his head in his hands. “I wish I could. I do not have the strength. My powers have been sapped.”

“So we should all just suffer? There’s nothing you can do?” He shook his head.

“What about those statues? The sentries? We could take a couple to help fight.”

“Only Kumi could stand up to this threat, and her strength is tied to mine. The rest…they are barely enough to protect the Golden Crescent,” Nyame said sadly. “Even if they were stronger, I cannot spare them now, not when I’m so weak.”

I sank down next to him on the bench. “So we’re doomed, then?”

The sky god turned back to the view. The sun winked behind a bank of low-hanging clouds, turning their undersides rosy pink.

He sighed. “Not yet. I may not be able to give you the help you seek, Anansesem. It will be some time before I am myself, but I can give you something else. It may increase the chance that my people will eventually be restored to their homes…to their lives, their happiness.”

I watched, confused, as Nyame stood up and plucked a rosy cloud from the sky.

Yeah, that’s right.

He plucked…a cloud…from the sky. Like it was a flower from one of the trees in the garden. He rolled the wisp between his two palms. Then he pressed both hands together and whispered something between them.

He extended his hand. “Your bracelet, please.”

I clutched the tassel from Eddie’s journal, not wanting to part with it.

Nyame smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. “No harm will come to it. I may be suffering from brand-fly poison, but I can still imbue a charm or two.”

I untied it and passed it over. Nyame took the tassel and tied a small charm onto it. When he handed it back, I gawked at the rose-gold adinkra resting next to Anansi’s symbol. It matched what was painted on the yachts in the marina, on the front of the palace, and on the arms of the statues.

“Gye Nyame,” I whispered, and the sky god nodded.

“You already have Anansi’s adinkra, which brings power to your stories. That is important—Alke is woven with stories, and the threads exist all around us. You can hear them sometimes. Music. Chanting. Rhythm.”

I inhaled. “I thought I was hearing things.”

“You were. The heartbeat of this world. If you concentrate, the sound can become so vivid you can almost see it.” Nyame sighed wistfully before pointing at the adinkra he’d just bestowed to me. “I cannot give you one of my sentries, Anansesem. But I can give you this charm. It will bring focus to your surroundings, and help you gain clarity. You’ll find the mysteries of Alke a bit…easier to solve.”

I looped the bracelet around my wrist and studied the silver and gold charms. They looked nice together. But how would they help us repair the hole?

“You’re wondering what good a little charm will do.” Nyame clasped his hands behind his back and tipped his head for me to join him. “Come, walk with me.”

We strolled around the garden. On the opposite side of the roof, facing southeast, Nyame stopped and stared at the dark, jagged mountains ringing the Golden Crescent.

“Alke is a land divided,” Nyame said after a moment. “The great cities do not share as they once did. The iron monsters only pushed a wedge into a fractured landscape that already existed. We used to meet every season, to swap ideas and music and stories. To exchange culture. Our sons danced with their daughters and their sons danced with ours. Our mothers taught their children and their mothers taught ours.”

“And with the tear and the iron monsters,” I finished, “you can’t make things better. MidPass and the rest of the Alkeans will always be divided, even if we huddle together, hiding from the same threat.” I shook my head. “It really needs to be fixed now.”

“It does. And I agree with your goal, if not your plan. Anansi, if he can be found and bribed, could weave the hole shut and greatly diminish the power of the iron monsters. But after that they’d still need to be defeated once and for all. Them,” he added grimly, “and this haint that’s tormenting you.”

At this Nyame’s face twisted into anger for a brief moment. Then he exhaled and pointed to a palace with seven towers, off by itself in the foothills of the soaring mountain range.

“That is Anansi’s palace. If you want a clue about the Story Box’s whereabouts, I would start there. Do not mistake me, Anansesem—this will be no easy quest. If you continue, you will be risking your life and the lives of your friends. But you must try, and so I give you these words of advice.”

I stood up straighter, ready to receive some profound words of wisdom.

“Those who help you may not be on your side, and those who oppose you can be your greatest allies.”

I waited for more, but Nyame just clasped his hands again and stared out, wise and all-knowing, like he’d just dropped some crazy freestyle bars and the crowd was going wild.

Nah.

I cleared my throat. “Um…is that it?”

He turned, surprised. “Yes. Do you need me to repeat it?” “No, but, like…can you elaborate?” “I don’t understand.”

“I mean, why does everything gotta be so mysterious? Can’t I get a clear instruction or something? A manual? A step-by-step guide to being a hero?”

“But…that’s not how this works.” The sky god looked confused.

“But you’re a god, right? Can’t you just abracadabra me a quest translator so I can make sure I’m doing the right thing?” “No! Heroes don’t—”

“I’m not a hero. I’m a boy with a crew straight out of a dusty fairy-tale book, and everybody expects me to confront beasts and monsters and fly around on a raft. I don’t even like flying. I’m scared of heights. There, I said it.”

“But—” Nyame looked worried now.

“And I don’t even get a sword or a spear or a magical slingshot?” “You’ve got the adinkra of the gods! What more—?”

“Man, you gave me a charm from the department store. Dad gives those to Mom when he forgets her birthday, and you expect it to make me clairvoyant against evil. Okay.” I shook my head. The confusion in Nyame’s golden eyes as he watched me walk away nearly made me laugh.

It would have been funny if my life wasn’t on the line.

# 28
# ANANSI'S LAIR

**EVEN FROM UP HIGH AND** at a distance, Anansi's palace lured your eyes. Partially hidden in a valley on the outskirts of the Golden Crescent, near the intimidating mountain cliffs of what Chestnutt called Isihlangu, it was surrounded by seven spiraling towers made of ivory and gold. Ayanna had to circle a few times to find a place to land the raft among the foothills. If Nyame's magnificent home displayed the sky god's wealth and power, Anansi's emphasized his cleverness.

"How do we get in?" Ayanna asked when we were on the ground. She whispered a soft, musical phrase and the raft shrank down to a size she could carry on her back.

Chestnutt spread out some papers she'd brought from the Warren to study, while Gum Baby snoozed under a blanket on the grass nearby.

Anansi's adinkra was front and center on each tower, painted in a shiny gold that drew your attention. But the most amazing feature was the braided silk that linked each tower in a glittering web. If you looked at them from one angle, the threads were invisible. Turn your head a bit, and suddenly they—and white fuzzy lumps scattered along them—popped into view.

And, at the center of the web high above us, in the middle of all seven towers, sat the palace.

I mean, Chicago had some impressive skyscrapers, but this was incredible.

"How *do* we get up there?" I asked Chestnutt.

The little bunny continued to rifle through her notes, but she kept shaking her head.

"I don't know. The only thing I see mentioned is that no one has ever gotten inside. Ever." She looked up and rubbed at her whiskers in frustration. "The Warren rates this place a five-out-of-five-paws difficulty."

I glanced at Ayanna. "Can we just fly up there on your raft?"

"I don't know." She chewed her lip. "Something about this bothers me." I studied the courtyard, with its marble flagstones, several of which were broken. Giant scars sliced through one spot, as if an oversize claw had ripped the earth. More of those weird lumps were scattered here and there.

The obvious treasure dangled just out of reach. A desperate person— say, someone trying to get the spider god to fix a mistake that had stirred up monsters—why, that person might try anything to get to Anansi in the palace above. If someone tried just a little harder, maybe attempted to climb the towers, or use a magic raft…

"It's a trap," I said slowly. "That palace is bait. I bet…I bet if we looked carefully, we'd find more of those threads all around the clearing. And that means those lumps—"

Ayanna's eyes widened, then she wrinkled her nose. "Oh, gross. Are those…?"

I nodded. "People who tried to find Anansi, got wrapped up in the web, and…"

"People…or iron monsters."

"Those, too."

As if on cue, one of the lumps on the ground wriggled, scaring the mess out of me. I might've squealed. But it was only Gum Baby throwing off her blanket. She sat up and hurled a sap ball at my head.

"SAP ATTACK! Who need hurting? Who dead? What happened?" I rubbed the stinging, sticky spot near my ear. "Nobody. Go back to sleep."

"Shoot, you ain't gotta tell Gum Baby twice. Y'all boring anyway." Sure enough, three seconds later the little loudmouth was back to snoring.

Ayanna chuckled, then sighed. "Okay, so now what? I don't see any way we're getting in."

"Yeah, I don't—" I stopped and stared at her, then held up my wrist.

Nyame's adinkra dangled from my bracelet, and the sky god's words echoed in my ears.

*It will bring focus to your surroundings.*

"I think I have an idea." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Anansi's palace had hundreds of stories whispering all around it. I could hear them, feel them, and more important, when I gripped the Gye Nyame adinkra tight and opened my eyes, I could *see* them.

"Sweet peaches," I whispered.

Anansi's threads crisscrossed the valley, and they were anchored everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*. Boulders, bushes—some smaller strands even clung to our clothes. They shimmered and rippled, and when I looked closer, I realized that the threads were fragments of stories—actual lines from tales I vaguely remembered—spun into golden silk.

"Tristan!" Ayanna's eyes widened when I turned to her, and Chestnutt squeaked in surprise.

"What?"

"Your eyes…They're glowing!"

I began to splutter in protest, but something shiny caught my attention. Behind them, a giant cylindrical boulder was gleaming as brightly as the towers in the valley. As if…

"That's no boulder," I said, realization smacking me in the face. "What are you babbling about, Bumbletongue?"

Oh, no, that wasn't realization. That was Gum Baby whacking me upside the head as she climbed onto my shoulder with a yawn.

I rolled my eyes. "I said, that's no boulder. It's another building." I ran up to the half-buried structure, and after a quick search, found a hidden door that we'd walked right past, except now it shimmered like sunshine on water. "Follow me," I said, and stepped into Anansi's home.

The descent into the underground lair took longer than I thought it would, partly because the curving staircase was covered in invisible booby traps. If it weren't for Nyame's gift, which enabled me to see them, we would've been splattered across the stone walls several times over.

Also, every ten seconds or so, Chestnutt wanted me to stop so she could take notes. "They're sure to let me into the Warren Society after this," she

said when I asked what she was doing. Even though I was impatient to find out if Anansi was hiding below, I bit my tongue and let her do her thing. There really wasn't any reason for Chestnutt to be excluded from Brer's army of bunny spies—from what I'd seen, she was more than capable. He was just being his typical annoying self.

We reached the bottom of the stairs like a slow-moving train of caution. I clutched the Gye Nyame adinkra, Ayanna clutched my arm, Gum Baby rode in my hoodie, and Chestnutt brought up the rear. A thick wooden door awaited, covered in cobwebs and dusted with golden Alkean greetings, and I eased it open, flinching as something tickled my head. I peeked inside, yelped, and quickly shut it again.

"What? What is it? What did you see, Tristan?" Ayanna whispered.

"An iron monster!"

"What?"

I hid behind the door, my heart thumping in my chest, as Ayanna and Chestnutt huddled next to me. Gum Baby crawled carefully out of my hood and put her ear to the door.

"Why ain't it trying to attack?" she asked.

I looked over my shoulder at Ayanna. That was a good question. There was nothing but silence inside. I cracked the door open and peeked in again.

Nyame's adinkra gave me the gift of sight, but it framed everything in golden words that told Alkean stories. Anansi's table was outlined by a snippet of a fable. A bed was covered in a spread made of lullabies. The cooking pots and the kettle were rimmed with opening prayers.

But the object that had frightened me half to death, standing right in the middle of the room, was the golden silhouette of a fetterling, poised to attack, with legends coiling around its chain body.

We tiptoed inside, and I found a torch lying on the floor. Ayanna lit it, and light flickered in the abandoned tower.

"Sweet peaches," I breathed.

Ayanna pursed her lips and didn't speak.

Chestnutt started scribbling furiously.

Gum Baby hopped down and stomped across the floor. "Is this what Gum Baby thinks it is?"

I let go of Nyame's adinkra—the strain of seeing so much detail was giving me a headache. My vision slowly returned to normal. "If you're asking me *Is that a fetterling tied up in a spider's silk*, then yes. If you're

asking *Are those more fetterlings tied up next to the table, with what looks to be notes*, also yes."

Ayanna moved farther into the room, carefully. "Anansi was studying the iron monsters? Why?"

The fetterling in the center of the room looked like it belonged in a museum. The Weaver's silk held the monster tight, its manacle-hands in mid-attack, its collar-head in mid-snap. Several others were in various stages of dismantlement in the corner, and bits of chain were scattered across the table.

"I don't know," I barked. "But he's not here. Which means we're stuck. Again." A wave of anger boiled in my stomach, and I slammed a fist onto the table, scattering papers and chains onto the floor.

Chestnutt started rustling through Anansi's notes while Ayanna sighed. "What do we do now?"

I threw up my hands. "I don't know! This whole trip has been one failure after another. That stupid haint has my friend locked up in ghost prison, and I'm never gonna get him back. And I'm also never getting home at this rate!"

"Hey—" Chestnutt began, but Ayanna cut her off.

"It's not all about you, flyboy! We're losing our home as we speak!" "I know that—"

"Well, then think of others before you start complaining."

Chestnutt hopped closer, holding some papers. "Um—"

I gritted my teeth and glared at Ayanna. "How about you get off my back?"

Her hands went to her staff, and I gripped the gloves in my pocket, just as two large balls of sap pelted us both between our eyes.

"Y'all being rude!" Gum Baby aimed another glob at us. "Gum Baby always gotta be the mature one. Chestnutt is *trying* to educate your ignorant butts. Now stop fighting and apologize."

Ayanna and I eyed each other. Gum Baby raised her sap balls higher, and I sighed. "I'm sorry. You're right, I'm not the only one who's lost something."

Ayanna grunted. "Yeah. I'm sorry, too."

Gum Baby lowered her arms. "Good. Now sit on the floor, crisscross applesauce."

I frowned. "What?"

“You heard Gum Baby!”

Ayanna shook her head. “I’m not sitting in this—”

“GUM BABY SAID SIT CRISSCROSS APPLESAUCE, SO YOU DO IT, OR GUM BABY’S GONNA TURN THIS WHOLE TRIP AROUND! NOW SIT!”

Somehow Ayanna and I were sitting, hands in our laps, and Gum Baby sniffed. “Good. Chestnutt?”

Chestnutt looked embarrassed, but she stood on her hind paws and held up a note. “I…I think I know where the Story Box is.”

I gawked, and Ayanna choked on air. “Where?”

“It looks like Anansi was studying how and why the iron monsters are drawn to stories, and he even managed to capture a few, but…I think something went wrong. More of them came and attacked him.”

A chill went down my spine, and I examined the room as Chestnutt continued. It looked like a meeting had taken place there. Several dishes and cups were knocked over. Whatever had happened, Anansi and his guest had been interrupted, and judging from the mess, a great struggle had occurred. But who—?

The answer struck like lightning.

“Brer Rabbit,” I whispered.

“What?” Ayanna looked around. “Where?”

“No. He said he and Anansi were working on a project for the Story Box, and then iron monsters attacked.”

“According to this entry here,” Chestnutt said, “something stronger than fett—those things over there came along, and Anansi fled. I guess Brer Rabbit did, too. But before they did, it looks like Anansi sent the Story Box somewhere impenetrable. Where no one could get it until he was ready to retrieve it.”

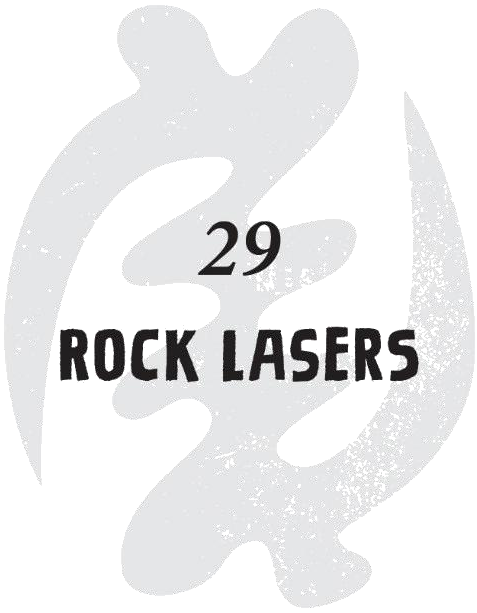
“Okay,” I said, impatient. “So where is it?”

Chestnutt gulped, and instead of replying, she turned over the note. Everybody gasped.

The schematic of a dark, foreboding mountain range was scrawled on the paper, showing tunnels, access points, and exits.

The same mountain range rising in the distance beyond the Golden Crescent.

“I think he hid it in the Ridge.”



# 29
# ROCK LASERS

**GUM BABY SCRAMBLED UP TO** her favorite perch in my hood and propped her elbows on my shoulders as we left Anansi's home. "The Ridge, huh? Gum Baby heard some crazy things about that place."

In Ayanna's arms, Chestnutt nodded. "Yup, yup. A mountain fortress. Nothing gets in or out without going through twelve levels of inspection. They're very territorial."

"Yes," Ayanna agreed. "MidPass and the Ridge have never gotten along. Something to do with the stories of Alke, and which belonged to whom." She pulled the raft from over her shoulders, laid it down, whispered something, and the raft grew to its normal size. She stepped on, set Chestnutt down in the middle, then raised an eyebrow. "Well, are you coming?" she asked. "We've got floating rock lasers to sneak past."

"Wait, wait. Run that by me again?" I said.

"You heard me," Ayanna said as she went through her checks.

"No, I don't think I did, because it sounded like you just said we'll have to dodge rock lasers."

"I did."

"Aaaaaaaand that's where you lost me."

Gum Baby climbed down my back and stalked around the raft with tiny footsteps, muttering to herself. Chestnutt began sketching something on the

floor of the raft.

"Rock lasers shouldn't be a thing," I said. "Why are they a thing?" Ayanna opened her mouth, closed it, then spoke in a rush. "Remember Kumi? The statue sentry from Nyame's palace? It's like that. The first line of defense."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

She threw up her arms. "What do you want me to say? The Ridge people don't like visitors. And if they sense for one second that their homes are under attack, they'll send out every warrior they have." In a sudden fury, she stabbed the air with a finger like she wanted to pin me to the raft. "So you'd better be absolutely sure about this. Because it's…" Some of the heat faded from her eyes as she turned to fasten her staff to the back of the raft. "This is going to be hard."

Chestnutt hopped over and nuzzled Ayanna's leg, and the pilot stooped over, picked her up, and buried her face in the bunny's fur. Then she set Chestnutt down, cleared her throat, and nodded. "Let's go over the plan. Maybe this time something will go right for once."

Chestnutt sat back on her hind legs and pointed at the map she'd drawn on the raft floor. "This is our target. The Ridge. A heavily defended, fiercely guarded, fortified city high up inside Isihlangu."

"Isihlangu?" I repeated with a frown. "Does that name mean anything?" "It means *shield*."

A shiver rippled down my spine. I squinted at the thick black section Chestnutt had drawn as she continued.

"But Isihlangu isn't just any mountain. It's a wall of rock so steep and high that its peaks are hidden in the clouds. The people used to come down and trade—at least that's what the records in Anansi's palace said—but ever since the iron monsters started boiling out of the Burning Sea, they've stayed behind their gates."

Chestnutt paused and I looked at Ayanna. "Having second thoughts?" she asked me. "Just wait, it gets better."

I ignored her, then turned pointedly back to Chestnutt. "Okay, it's a tough walnut to crack. But it can be cracked, right? We can get in there somehow."

Chestnutt cleared her throat. "Yup, yup. Well, sort of. Maybe." "Maybe?"

"I mean, I think it'll work. Hopefully."

“Hopefully?” My voice started to rise, and Chestnutt hurried to continue.

“See, look at these.” She tapped a paw on a section of the drawing where it looked like a series of trails went up the mountain. “They need some way of getting food from the farms at the bottom of the mountain to the city at the top. So they built these trams. They even carry passengers.”

“Like trains,” I said. “So we’ll ride with the other passengers?”

“Oh no. They’d see we’re strangers. We’re going to hide in the back, with the trash.”

I stared at her.

“With the trash?”

“Yup, yup! Only for a little bit, and then, before we’re discovered, we’ll slip off into a ventilation tunnel. Hopefully.”

“Assuming that works,” said Ayanna, “what do we do once we get to the top?”

The bunny took a deep breath before saying, “According to my cousin Lily, who heard it from her sister Apple, whose best friend’s mother’s second cousin, Tulip, traveled there with a trading party one time, the people of the Ridge have a vault where they keep their most valuable items. They call it the Atrium. Anansi circled it on this diagram.” She pulled out a page she’d taken from the Weaver’s workroom.

I squinted at it. “The Atrium, huh?”

“That’s gotta be where the Story Box is. Yup, yup,” said Chestnutt, hopping excitedly.

“All right.” I looked at my squad. “So we catch the tram, make our way to this Atrium, snag the Story Box, and hightail it out of there. Sounds easy enough.”

Ayanna didn’t look convinced. “But first, we have to avoid those floating rock lasers. Everybody, hang on tight—I need to be sure you’re not rolling about, getting sick over everything.”

My stomach lurched at the thought.

“And, Gum Baby?” Ayanna said. “Get ready for some precoffinary measures.”

“AAAAAHHHHH!”

Have I mentioned that I don't love heights? If it weren't for the fact that the island of MidPass, hundreds of Midfolk, and the spirit of my dead best friend depended on me, I would've called it a night.

"AAAAAHHHHH!"

Silver and black lightning bolts were being hurled at us by giant black stone towers with jewels at the tops, but that was no reason to panic, now was it?

"AAAAAHHHHH!"

I lay on my back on the raft, spread-eagled so I looked like a brown X, my hands and feet stuck in mounds of sap. Why? Well, flying rafts don't come with seat belts, and the rock lasers were all riled up.

"Will you stop screaming!" Ayanna yelled at me.

She stood in a crouch, both hands on her staff as the wind whipped her braids behind her. She flinched to her right, and all of a sudden the raft tilted sharply, and, regrettably, I was unable to follow her instructions.

A blast of night-dark lightning (Nightning? Did I just make up a word? IT'S TRADEMARKED, CHUMPS, HANDS OFF!) whizzed by and scorched the earth below. I could smell burning grass and dirt.

"Make them stop shooting at us!" I hollered.

Chestnutt huddled in a corner, the straps of my backpack—which Ayanna had secured to the raft—crisscrossed over her little body like a harness. She squeezed her eyes shut and her ears lay flat against her head.

Ayanna gritted her teeth. "Oh, I'm sorry. Allow me to make that request."

Another blast barely missed our heads. I opened my mouth to scream, but Gum Baby's voice cut me off.

"We're almost clear, Ayanna! Just one more! Ready?"

I looked up, pressing my chin to my chest to focus on the doll at the front of the raft. She stood with her legs spread wide, her hands on her hips, and her miniature braids pulled back in a ponytail.

"Ready for what?" I looked back at Ayanna. "Ready for what?"

She grimaced. "Something I hoped we wouldn't need to do, but if we don't shut down these lasers, reinforcements will be all over us."

"Um—"

"GB!" she yelled, talking right over me. "Here we go!"

Gum Baby nodded. Ayanna tightened her grip on the staff and glanced at me. "Hold on tight."

I tried to crane my neck as far up as I could. “But I’m already stu— OOOOOHHHHH!”

The raft jerked to the right just as a polished rock tower the size of a skyscraper appeared in our path. Perfectly smooth, like a cylinder of black glass, it stretched way above us. As we circled it, rising in a spiral, the sheer height of the thing blew my mind. Jagged blue sapphires and purple amethysts floated in a space cut way at the top, and they flashed in warning, like a lighthouse. The hairs on my arms stood up straight, and then, with a crackling burst, another blast of nightning shot out of the precious stones. The raft swung sideways to avoid it, and Ayanna yelled.

“Now, Gum Baby!”

But our fearless little marksman—markswoman (marks-doll-baby?)— was already taking aim and screaming at the top of her lungs.

“Sap attack! Sap, sap, sap, sap attack! Super sap attack!”

Glob after sticky glob of sap landed right in the center of the blinking gems, dousing the beams of light, and Gum Baby waved her hands urgently.

“Go, go, go!”

Ayanna pulled back on the rudder, and the raft peeled away, diving toward the rocky slope far below. The shiny tower whizzed by as we dropped, and then a rumble sounded high above us. The sap must have gummed up the works, because a deafening *crack* echoed down the mountainside.

Chestnutt squealed in fright, and I clenched every muscle as the tower began to lean to one side. Its top was gone—a smoking crater was all that remained. The structure continued to topple until it hit the mountainside with a thunderous *boom* and rolled down the slope in pieces.

“So much for stealth,” I muttered. “Can someone un-gum me now?”

Ayanna ignored me, focusing on keeping the raft low to the ground. Gum Baby hopped on my chest. She squatted and patted me on the jaw.

“Gum Baby would help, but she don’t do ‘un-gum.’ So sit tight, big boy. Enjoy the rest of the flight.” She sat on my chest and leaned back, rolling her little head like she was stretching her neck, and sighed. “This is nice. We should do this more often.”

I growled. “I’m gonna—”

“I see the tram!” Ayanna called.

A long dark trench sliced through the steep slope of Isihlangu, stretching up into the clouds, where it disappeared. At the bottom was a

gleaming silver train, its line of cars nearly vertical as it waited to travel up the mountain.

A piercing whistle sounded, and Ayanna's face grew worried.

"They're about to leave. Hold on!"

She aimed the raft straight down, and we dropped like an anchor. The wind pulled the scream from my mouth, and my lips flapped like I was blowing a thirty-second raspberry. The train grew bigger and bigger, and Gum Baby cackled louder and louder as we got closer and closer.

"Ayanna," I tried to say calmly as we flew at full speed toward the rear of the train. The lip of the canyon zipped past in a blur.

"Ayanna?"

The last car on the train had an open door, wide enough to hurl garbage in and out of, I guessed. That's where the raft was heading. That itty-bitty entrance.

"Ayanna!"

I looked back and my heart skipped a beat. She wore a grim, determined expression and I swallowed, then squeezed my eyes shut tight. The last thing I heard was Gum Baby's shrieking in my ear.

"Aha-ha-ha-ha, y'all ain't ready for this! Gum Squaaaaad!" *Whump!*

# 30
# INTO ISIHLANGU

**IT WAS DARK, AND SOMETHING** squishy pressed against my arm. “I…want to go home.”

My hands were still glued, or gummed, to the raft, which had landed. Something else—slimy and cold—touched my face, just above my mouth, and I couldn’t free my arms to brush it away. I kept my lips very still as I spoke. “I really…really…want to go home.”

The floor of the tram vibrated, and it felt like we were aiming straight toward the sky.

Something rustled next to me, and then the darkness disappeared as whatever was lying on top of me was pulled off. Ayanna held on to a metal pole that ran from floor to ceiling, an exasperated look on her face.

“This,” she said, waving her arms up at the front of the tram. “This was all your idea. You don’t get to whine, flyboy.”

She touched her staff to the raft, and the wood warmed beneath my wrists and ankles. The gummy restraints loosened and I dropped down, crashing into the back wall.

“Oof!”

Ayanna snorted. “When you’re done being goofy, you should take a look at this.”

As I watched her use some handholds to climb to the top—or front of—the tram car, I made a face at her back. When I sat up, my face froze that

way.

I was sitting in Alke's version of a subway. Chicago's L train was nothing compared to this.

I mean, the rear half of the train car was disgusting, but it was all our fault. It was the trash car, after all. When we landed, we'd knocked over thin, papery containers filled with garbage. Old clothes were strewn across the floor, and bags of rotten food had splattered the walls. I shuddered. It was like we were riding in the loader of a garbage truck. Ever smelled the nasty trash water they drip behind them? Yeah, I needed a bath. Two baths. With a shower in the middle. A clean sandwich.

I groaned as I pulled myself upright. I slid closed the door we had entered so the trash wouldn't fall out and give us away. Then I scrambled to join the others.

A shimmering curtain of light separated the rear half of the car from the front. When I passed through the divider, I felt a tingling sensation from head to toe, and the scents of lemon, ginger, and fresh air washed over me. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, all traces of our nasty landing had been removed.

"Man," I breathed. "I need one of those curtains in my bedroom." This part of the tram car had a soft silver glow. Ayanna and Chestnutt sat in slightly inclined bucket seats that were beaded in beautiful patterns. Gum Baby stood on the back of Chestnutt's chair. They stared at the scenery out of floor-to-ceiling windows.

As I approached Ayanna—very slowly and carefully—she nodded toward the outside. "Look."

I collapsed into a seat next to her, whispering a prayer of thanks for the harness I strapped on, then gazed out the window—

—and gasped.

I had seen the train's vertical position from the air, but it was even more intense when you were actually inside it. We were climbing straight up the side of Isihlangu. The walls of the trench we were moving through had dropped, and the view beyond stretched for an eternity. The valley of the rock-laser sentinels lay far below. The mountainside was streaked with sparkling black and blue lines, like the veins of some giant we little insects were inching across. When I pressed my face against the window, I could see the mountain peaks disappearing into the clouds.

“Look.” Chestnutt pointed out tiny turret-like rocks with the same gems rotating in them. The tram zipped past a series of them, and suddenly hitching a ride in a trash train didn’t seem so bad.

Between the rock lasers, the sheer mountain face, and its completely obscured city on top, the Ridgefolk really did seem to discourage visitors.

Yay.

Ayanna nudged me. “This is our stop.”

Gum Baby scrambled back behind my head and into my hood, and Ayanna picked up Chestnutt. I frowned. “But we’re still moving.”

“And we don’t want to be on board when it stops,” said Ayanna. “Unless you want to introduce yourself to a group of angry guards.”

“Ah. No. No, I do not.”

Ayanna expanded the raft, we all stepped on board, and we floated through the cleansing curtain and back into the trash compartment. The bits of nastiness whirled around when I slid open the door, and I flinched as something wet splashed against my bicep.

Chestnutt poked her head out of the crook of Ayanna’s arm. “Wait for it. A service entrance should be coming up in three…two…one—now.”

The raft shot out of the tram, through a small cloud of mist that felt cool on my skin, and into a hole cut into the smooth exterior of Isihlangu. Ayanna set us down just inside the entrance, and more veins of blue silver lit the passage beyond.

Chestnutt hopped down and her ears twitched forward. After a second, she turned around. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Something went right for a change,” Ayanna muttered softly. “The guards must’ve been distracted by the laser-tower explosion. Well, let’s not waste the opportunity. They know something’s wrong. We need to get in, grab the Story Box, and get out.”

Gum Baby nodded and leaned forward by my ear. “Don’t touch any strange statues this time, Bumbletongue,” she whispered.

“Me? You’re the one who—”

Ayanna hissed and glared at us.

“Hush!” “But—”

“Quiet! You’re going to get us caught.”

I shook my head as Gum Baby cackled softly in my hood and followed the others deep into the mountain.

The tunnel twisted and turned for several hundred feet. As we moved farther inside, the vibration I'd felt earlier grew stronger.

"What is that noise?" I whispered.

Ayanna shrugged. Gum Baby ignored me and hummed a few bars from the song she'd been making up. She called it "The Ballad of Gummy." It was catchy.

Chestnutt glanced back. "The Warren doesn't know about this. It's one of the few places we can't get into. My aunt's best friend's cousin said they've caught every kit sent here."

My eyes grew wide. "You mean baby rabbits? What happens to them? They don't…"

Chestnutt shook her head. "Nope, nope, nothing like that. They just send them home with an insult. *Better luck next time*—that sort of thing, only ruder."

"Oh."

"That's why this is so incredible. If I can bring new information back to the Warren Society, they'll have to let me in. They just have to."

I heard the same longing in her voice that Gum Baby had when she dreamed about becoming a pilot. Ayanna and I exchanged glances. We all had something to prove to someone, even if it was just ourselves.

The tunnel widened and brightened, and the exit appeared around a curve. Chestnutt and Ayanna peeked out first. They gasped.

"What? What is it?" I whispered.

Ayanna muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a prayer, then motioned me and Gum Baby forward. "Come on, we're wasting time."

I stared at her as I stepped out of the tunnel. She was so confus—

My stomach flipped and flopped as I saw that I was on a very thin ledge with a steep drop-off.

"I hate heights."

Gum Baby leaned over my shoulder and whistled. "Boy, you in trouble. Let Gum Baby know if you scared. If you scared, say you scared. Ain't no shame. Gum Baby got this."

I swallowed and crept out a little farther.

Isihlangu was almost completely hollow. I don't know what I expected, but there really was a city inside a mountain. Obsidian towers and spires rose out of the walls at an angle. Thousands of homes had been cut into the rock, and each had a single large gemstone embedded above its entrance,

like a diamond porch light. Glimmering tracks of blue-black amethysts crisscrossed the vast open space, connecting one side of the underground city with the other.

I gripped my chest. “Are they…are they *skateboarding* across?”

A trio of Ridgefolk—I couldn’t tell their ages from here—rode across the chasm at breakneck speed a few levels down. They stood on wide, flat oblong slabs of obsidian that hovered over the amethyst rails. My eyes widened at the vicious club-like staffs strapped to their backs. I could hear them laughing from here. Kids? They disappeared beneath the ledge we hid on, and Ayanna hissed at me.

“Hurry up, flyboy, unless you want to get caught!”

After one more stomach-tightening glance over the edge, I followed Ayanna and Chestnutt up the winding path.

*“The ballad of the gummy, ballad of the gummy.*
*Strongest and the fiercest, and her nose is never runny.*
*Sap attack, back it back, the hero of the hour.*
*Riding on her bumbly steed, who needs to take a shower.”*

I rolled my eyes as Gum Baby hummed the rest of the song under her breath. *Bumbly steed.* The nerve!

“There it is,” Chestnutt whispered. She pointed near the ceiling. “That has to be it.”

What I’d thought was the ceiling was really the bottom of a giant room carved into the mountain peak. The ledge we stood on curved around several more times before it disappeared inside.

A booming sound shook the mountain, throwing me flat to my stomach.

“What was that?” Ayanna asked. Her voice trembled just a bit—I didn’t blame her. Mine came out in a high-pitched squeak as I peeked over the edge.

“Don’t know.” I cleared my throat. “Wait. Something’s happening down there.”

The large main doors were opening. A group of Ridgefolk floated in on obsidian hoverboards. They slowed to a stop for just a second before spreading out and taking off in different directions.

I looked up. “They’re searching for something.”

Ayanna met my eyes, then nodded. “Us. That boom must have been an alarm signal. We need to hurry.”

We scurried up the ledge, trying to keep low, and, after several nerve-racking minutes, we reached the final curve. The Atrium. Two giant doors stood ajar and I breathed a sigh of relief. It was unlocked. Ayanna looked at me, and I swallowed and moved to the front. Gum Baby bounced up and down in my hood.

"Game time, big boy."

"Yeah, yeah." I thumbed the adinkra on my bracelet. Eddie's Anansi symbol was cool to the touch, as was Nyame's. No iron monsters or booby traps here.

Just a mountain full of angry Ridgefolk.

"Strongs keep punching," I muttered. Then I took a deep breath and darted inside, ready with my empty sack for a snatch-and-grab, a dine-and-dash (not exactly the same, but you get the concept). The only thing missing was a dope soundtrack to this epic heist we were about to pull off.

Ayanna pushed in behind me and jabbed me in the ribs. "Why are you humming? You want to get us caught? Idiot."

My face flushed as we stepped into the room. "Don't poke me! And we won't get caught. I"—we both froze as the wickedly sharp tips of three spears were leveled at our faces—"promise."

# 31
# THE ELDERS

**THE SPEARS DIDN'T WAVER. I** swallowed and looked past them to the people—guards, I guess—holding them. They wore long blanketlike cloaks with mesmerizing stitched and beaded patterns. The material seemed to absorb light, and if I gazed at the beads too long, they started to glow and burn my eyes, like I was staring into the sun. Their faces were wrapped in cloth so only their eyes could be seen—bright, glittering eyes that watched my every movement. Two of them wore beaded headwraps, and the third had bead bracelets around the wrists and ankles. When I flinched from the glare of a bracelet, the guard in front glowered at me even harder.

All in all, they were beautiful, and I could've stood there for hours gawking, but I needed to do something.

I cleared my throat and stepped forward with my hands up. "My name is __"

All three cloaks were thrown aside as the guards dropped into fighting stances. Chestnutt squeaked in alarm.

"Tristan," Ayanna whispered.

I swallowed and backed up.

The spears were about as long as Ayanna's staff and had wide leaf-shaped blades the size of footballs. And now, in addition to those, each guard produced one of those polished clubs the patrollers had been carrying.

Okay. Yeah.

"You will come with us. You will speak before the council." The guard in the front spoke through her face covering in a soft but clear voice. "Or you will speak to my kierie." She twirled her club in her left hand, and my eyes followed the wicked head of the weapon.

I gulped. "Yep. Yes. Yes, we will, that's what we'll do. Right, y'all?"

"Yes!"

"Yup, yup!"

"Gum Baby ain't going nowh—*uuurgghh*—"

Ayanna had grabbed Gum Baby and covered her mouth. The lead guard's eyes narrowed, but she nodded to her comrades.

"Take them."

One guard picked up Gum Baby and Chestnutt by their necks. The other guard tied Ayanna's and my wrists in front of us with strips of cloth. They marched us out of the Atrium and into chaos. The guard nearest me slipped the cover down off her face—it was a girl just a few years older than me— and she grabbed me by the collar and hissed, which I guessed was supposed to be a warning.

Outside, the entire population of the Ridge seemed to line the walkway that spiraled down the interior of the mountain. Apparently, everybody in Isihlangu had come to witness the commotion, and all of them were armed. Men, women, and children gripped clubs and scowled as we passed. Nobody spoke.

Well, nobody from the Ridge.

"Get your hands off Gum Baby! This ain't no hug-fest. Who you frowning at? Better send those looks that way—Gum Baby ain't the one." I gritted my teeth. "Gum Baby," I muttered, "maybe you can, I don't know, *not* harass our captors?"

"Gum Baby ain't caught," she said, sniffing in contempt. "She's escorting y'all for your own protection."

I started to say something else, then shut up when my guard waved at me to hush. The other guard dangled Gum Baby and Chestnutt. "What about them, Thandiwe?"

My guard—Thandiwe—pursed her lips, then shrugged. "Bag them" was all she said.

Chestnutt whimpered as she and a now-gagged Gum Baby were stuffed in a sack. I grimaced—assuming we all survived, I'd never hear the end of

it. Thandiwe pushed me toward the edge, and I resisted.

"No, wait—"

"Keep quiet and move," she snapped. "Step down, now."

I tossed a nervous look back, then inched forward to peer over the edge. One of the floating obsidian hoverboards waited, bobbing up and down above a rail. From this close I could see it was bigger than I'd assumed. It was shaped like a wide trapezoid, and there were two indentations in the middle. Two more hoverboards floated on either side, and I realized the guards must've ridden the rails up here—that's how they'd arrived so fast.

Man, that board was really big. Big enough for two people to stand on.

Oh, crap.

"Nope." I shook my head. "I'll walk down."

"What's the matter, thief? Scared?" The girl slipped her kierie into a holster behind her back, so it could join her spear, and folded her arms beneath her cloak. "Having second thoughts?"

I mumbled something.

"What?"

"I don't do heights," I muttered. Ayanna winced.

"Speak up, boy."

"I DON'T DO HEIGHTS!"

The shout echoed throughout the entire mountain. A second passed, and then all the Ridgefolk burst into laughter. And I mean every single one. Even a baby, wrapped behind his mother's back, flashed a gummy grin and drooled at me.

The nerve.

Thandiwe wiped a tear from her eye and gasped for air. "Get on the forebear before you embarrass yourself further." I opened my mouth to protest and her smile disappeared. "Now."

I shut my trap, then took a deep breath and stepped off the edge onto the glass skateboard—the forebear. It sank a little like a boat would in the water, and I held both hands out for balance and shut my eyes.

"Move to the middle, near the back."

I did as I was told, and she smirked and held up two metal loops tied to her belt.

"Hold on tight, or you might fall. That would be a shame."

I took them, squeezed them in my fists, and waited for her signal that we were going to take off. Which is why, when all of a sudden we leaped

forward onto the black metal rail and zoomed toward the ground miles below, I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Everything was a blur. The metal hoops bit into my palms as I gripped them harder each time we swerved or dipped or dove. I swear we took the scariest way down. The forebear flicked up and down, left and right, jumping from rail to rail with the slightest movement of the girl's feet. The kids who skated the handrails at the park back in Chicago would've been impressed. Me, too, if I hadn't had to close my eyes every few seconds.

"Are you that scared, thief?"

Thandiwe's voice whipped back to me. I gritted my teeth and didn't answer.

"You brave the wrath of Isihlangu by breaking in, but some wind in your face terrifies you? You are the most pathetic of thieves. I hope the council sends you to the mines for the rest of your miserable life, once you answer for your other crimes."

I opened my eyes again and focused on the beaded wrap on her head. "What other crimes?"

"Don't treat me like I'm stupid," Thandiwe snapped. "We've been hunting for you and the others. You'll talk soon enough. Isihlangu is angry. You'll face the council now."

She tipped the forebear forward and we hurtled down some more, and whatever protests I was going to make died in my throat. I didn't scream again, though. Wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. But as the ground approached and we slowed, questions bounced around my head.

*What other crimes?*

*How can a mountain be angry?*

*What council?*

The forebear stopped on an elevated platform right in the middle of the mountain floor. Great, another stage. Ridgefolk streamed out of their homes carved into the mountain to gather around. They rode their own forebear or doubled or tripled up on someone else's. Ayanna arrived with her guard, a middle-aged woman, and the third guard dumped Chestnutt and Gum Baby next to us. In the process, Gum Baby's gag slipped off, which I was very sorry about.

"Gum Baby gonna act a fool in a second," she promised me, and I shushed her.

The crowd surrounding us filled the cavern, and more zipped around on rails above our heads. Beads of sweat gathered on my forehead. “This isn’t an interrogation,” I whispered to Ayanna. “This is a trial.”

Shuffling sounds came from behind us. An elderly woman, with graying dreadlocks peeking out of a bright yellow headwrap and wearing a brilliant gold-studded blanket draped over her shoulders, stepped barefoot onto the stone stage.

A hush fell over the crowd.

I gulped. “I guess she’s our prosecutor.”

A sharp jab in the back cut off my comments. Thandiwe glared at me and took out her kierie again. “You will show the diviner some respect, thief.”

*Diviner?*

I kept my mouth shut, though, and turned around.

“If this is a trial,” Ayanna whispered, “where are the judge and jury?” The old woman raised her arms, and then, in a voice that surprised me with its deep strength and volume, shouted to the top of the mountain.

“Ancestors! Lend your children your guidance and wisdom. We have need! Please, descend from your thrones on high!”

Ayanna and I exchanged confused glances. But before I could say anything, a million pencil-thin beams of light radiated out of the gemstones above every house. They blazed brighter than any sun, and a giant flare exploded silently just above the stage.

I flinched and, with my eyes closed, felt Ayanna do the same.

When I opened them again, a group of men and women sat on stools at one end of the stone stage. I looked around, confused as to where they had come from.

My hands were still tied, but I was able to reach out a finger to touch Nyame’s adinkra charm on my opposite wrist. As I did, I peered more closely at the newcomers.

I held back a gasp. I could see *through* them.

“They’re spirits,” I mumbled, and my knees went limp. “The ancestors.”

The ancestor in front was a thin older man, with a heavily beaded blanket across one shoulder, short curly hair, and a stern expression. The way he sat with one leg crossed over the other reminded me of Granddad. That didn’t reassure me.

He nodded at the crowd and bowed to the diviner, who returned an even deeper one.

Finally, he looked at me and my crew, and his eyes narrowed.

"And at last…here you are. I must confess, I am deeply disappointed. You've taken much, boy. You and the others have stolen your last piece of our culture. No more! We will make an example out of you."

I shook my head. "Sir, we didn't—"

"You will not lie to my face!" He stabbed a ghostly finger at us. "You were caught in our trap, plain as day. We knew the trickster would send someone, but children? He is truly desperate."

Gum Baby blew a raspberry. "This is the worst heist Gum Baby has ever been a part of."

"How many heists have you gone on?" I muttered out the side of my mouth.

She counted on her tiny fingers.

"Two." "Not including stealing Eddie's

journal?" "Oh. Um, one. This one."

I snorted, then froze. *Eddie's journal.* An idea tickled the back of my brain. Maybe…just maybe. If I—

The elderly spirit leaned forward, and the others around him floated closer on their stools, until a semicircle of ancestors hemmed us in.

"What's this? Conspiring? No plan will save you and your band of culture-ravagers!"

I licked my lips. This didn't look good. But I couldn't go out like a loser. Somehow, they thought we were a part of some grand circle of thieves, but we were innocent. At least up to that moment. But who would try to break into a fortified mountain, unless they were desperate, like us?

"Speechless!" The spirit pounded his ceremonial stool with the palm of his hand and shook his head. "You have no defense. First you take our people, then our—"

My head snapped up.

Ayanna said, "What?"

"Wait," I interrupted. Thandiwe shifted behind me, but I ignored her and stepped forward. "What do you mean, 'take your people'? You've had people taken, too?"

The elder's eyes narrowed. "Do not play the fool, boy. This is no game. This is the life, the history, and the future of my people! You think you can

dance your way into this mountain and slip away with our children's inheritance? With their parents, their brothers, and their sisters?" He slapped his stool again, and when he pointed at us, his finger quivered. "You will tell us why you took them and where they are. One way"—he looked at Thandiwe, who stepped forward with spear and kierie in both hands—"or another."

Chestnutt buried her head in Ayanna's feet, and even Gum Baby gripped my leg tightly. I couldn't let them down. I had led them here—it was my responsibility to get them out.

"Fine," I said.

Go-time.

I stepped forward again—only to stop when the edge of a spear gently touched my neck.

Maybe *not* go-time, then.

"Make your next move very slowly, thief." Thandiwe spat her words out like poison.

Okay, slow-time.

I raised my arms very deliberately, keeping my tied hands outstretched, and prayed that—for once—I knew what I was doing.

"What if I told you I know who took your people? They also took friends of ours and are hunting us even now."

The elder ancestor narrowed his eyes. "You—"

"What if I told you…" I said, riding right over his words and the gasps of the audience. "What if I told you that the other lands of Alke are under the same threat? That because no one talked with each other, and"—I pointed around the room, ignoring the spear at my throat—"because you all closed your borders and refused to come out, you and Nyame and everyone else, you failed to protect everything that you loved."

"Be careful, boy," Thandiwe hissed. "Be very

careful." No pressure, then.

I smiled and, keeping my arms raised, wiggled my left wrist. The Anansi adinkra charm caught the light, and a murmur swept through the crowd surrounding the stage.

"Let me tell you a story."

# 32
# SPIRIT OF THE IMBONGI

**“A STORY?” THANDIWE STARED AT** me, incredulous. She turned to the ancestors. “Honored ones, let me take this…this *pretender,* this prince of thieves, to the mines, where his words will be the only ones he hears in a long time.”

Prince of thieves? That was actually pretty cool.

The mines, not so much.

The elder ancestors floated in silence. Finally, the leader scratched his chin—so spirits itched?—and gestured at the diviner standing nearby. “What say you, my Amagqirha?”

The old woman never looked up. She sort of did this thing where she spoke and sang at the same time. If you’ve ever heard a preacher get excited in the middle of a sermon, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Her voice rang clear and high, surprising me—then again, Nana could seem small and weak, too, until she decided to tell you about yourself. But this woman, this Amagqirha, she never stopped moving to her own rhythm.

“This one has the blessing of gods and the spirit of the imbongi, Elder Fezile,” she said. “I can feel it. If he speaks, Isihlangu should listen.”

Murmurs went through the crowd of onlookers as the Amagqirha lifted her head and stared straight through me. Eyes as black as the obsidian dangling above our heads pinned me where I stood.

“Speak, imbongi. Speak.”

Her voice tumbled around inside my head as she slowly circled the ghostly ancestors, humming and rattling her beads. Every footstep kicked up a little cloud of dust that flashed silver above the stage. Shadows moved to her beat.

And then…then I felt it.

The story I needed to tell—she was humming it. My fingers started twitching and my foot started tapping.

The ancestors leaned close to one another and talked before coming to some decision.

Chief Elder Fezile looked at me. “Proceed” was all he said.

“May I…?” I asked, holding up my tied wrists. “I can’t tell a story without them. I promise I won’t hurt anyone.”

The chief gave a curt nod, and, with one swipe of her spear, Thandiwe cut my bonds.

I couldn’t help it—I grinned as I turned to the crowd.

Ayanna took one look at my face and groaned. “Don’t do too much,” she whispered.

“Naw, do the most, Bumbletongue,” Gum Baby said. “Gum Baby gonna just sit here and watch, but you go ahead and do the most.”

Their advice disappeared as the rhythm of the story swelled in my ears. What’s a song but a story told to a beat? I waited until the Amagqirha had made a full circle around the gathered ancestors. When I was sure of the rhythm, I joined in.

She hummed, and I stomped. She rattled, and I clapped.

A familiar buzzing grew in my fingertips, the sign that a story needed to be let out. I took a deep breath and concentrated, trying to make sure I got this right. When I couldn’t take it any longer, I reached out and grabbed some of the dust the Amagqirha had kicked up, and some of the shadows stretching across the stage. I pulled them into my fists and held them tight.

*“Let’s say there are monsters,”* I boomed into the near-silent mountain city. My eyes swept the crowd. The rhythm had caught on, and they were now clapping along.

That’s the power of the Anansesem, I realized. Giving the story to the listeners, so they can pass it on to others.

Anansesem shared not only the stories, but also the storytelling experience.

I smiled. “Let’s say there are monsters. Let’s say they exist. We say this because it’s true. Is it true?”

“Yes!” a child yelled before being shushed.

I pointed in the direction of the voice. “Of course it is! Monsters exist all around us. I say Abiyoyo…”

I threw some shadow and dust high into the air, and the crowd gasped. The clapping stopped, children shrieked, and more than a few adults backed away as a ten-foot giant appeared. Hulking, menacing, with eyes of blazing silver, Abiyoyo stomped around the stage, roaring silently at children he spotted.

“Listen to your parents, young ones,” I called, “or Abiyoyo will come for you. Or maybe the Evil Ones who chased Demane and Demazane!”

The giant faded into a corner, and I threw a little more story into the air. A boy and a girl sprang out of the dust cloud and raced through a forest of inky-black trees. Behind them, shadowy two-legged creatures gave chase, their mouths filled with shiny, razor-sharp teeth. The girl and the boy hid in a cave, and the hungry creatures ran on by, leaping off the stage and into the crowd.

More shrieks rang out, and then nervous laughter rippled through the audience as they realized the conjured creatures had disappeared.

“Yes,” I continued, “let’s say there are monsters.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. This next part was going to be difficult.

“Let’s say there’s a *new* monster. Something…something that doesn’t want your money or treasures. It doesn’t want to eat your children or dreams. No.”

I tossed a giant fetterling into the air, and the crowd went deathly silent. “It wants it *all*.”

Thandiwe took a step forward and her arm trembled as she raised it to point at the iron monster. “I’ve seen this…this thing!” She looked at the ancestors on the stage. “I’ve seen it.”

“It hunts us,” I said, turning and stepping up next to her. “It doesn’t care if you’re from the Golden Crescent or from MidPass. It doesn’t care if you’re holed up in a thicket the size of Lake Michigan, or in a fortress inside the heart of a mountain. It will find you, your children, all your loved ones, and drag them back to where its boss awaits.”

“Its boss?” the elder ancestor said.

I nodded, then tossed the last—and biggest—fistful into the air.

An undefined shape, larger than John Henry, swirled above the stage. Shadows slipped toward it, as if it were a black hole of pure evil. As the form fed, it grew and grew, until it nearly covered the entire stage, and when it had gorged on all the shadows it could find, it turned and floated toward the crowd. At the last moment, just when it looked as if it would descend and begin ravaging the Ridgefolk, I stomped my feet and shouted at the same time:

"THE MAAFA!"

The monster burst into shadows that fled into the corners.

Someone screamed. When I looked around, I saw Gum Baby lying on the floor as if she had fainted. Chestnutt was fanning the little drama queen with her ears.

"But what is it? Why does it hunt us?" Another spirit, a woman with a large headwrap, leaned forward on her cane.

"How can we stop it?"

"What can we do?"

I raised my hands and the ancestors grew silent. "This thing hunts you…because of me."

Rumbles of anger and confusion swept the space, but I pressed on. "I come from a place far from here called Alabama. I ripped a hole between our worlds when I damaged an old, powerful Bottle Tree. When I fell through the hole, something came with me. Something old. Something evil. A haint that I freed. Now it's looking for me, and it's riling up an old enemy of Alke from the depths of the Burning Sea—the Maafa."

The ancestors gasped. From the looks on their faces, some—if not most —had been around to witness the battles between the gods and the Maafa. They whispered among each other, and I held up my hands.

"We have to stop these iron monsters—more and more are appearing in Alke, each bigger and eviler than the last, and if we don't find Anansi and get him to fix the hole in the sky, they will overrun us. There will be no place any of us can hide."

I dropped my hands and took a deep breath. The crowd murmured while the elders conferred with each other before the chief, Fezile, finally nodded and looked at me. "We've seen this hole in the sky. If it is indeed fueling the violent energy that is coursing through these 'iron monsters,' we would do

well to continue as we have been recently. Remain hidden in the mountain. Lock our doors to all outsiders. Protect our children."

A murmur swept through the crowd, with many nodding. Not all, however. Thandiwe looked unconvinced. But she didn't challenge the chief. My shoulders slumped. This had been a long shot, trying to get the Ridgefolk to help. And I couldn't really blame them.

"I understand," I said. "Believe me, I do. But please listen to me—there is no hiding. These things will find you—all of you—even here." I turned in a circle with my arms up, indicating the entire cavern.

"They even found us in the Thicket!" Chestnutt piped up.

"If you don't want to lose more of your people, we must try," I pleaded. "Please. This—everything, it's…it's my fault, and I have to fix it."

When my voice cracked, Ayanna took over. "Nyame's Story Box is the key. We think it's here, and it's the way to lure Anansi…"

Fezile looked as if he thought that was a foolhardy plan.

"It has to work," I said, trying to put conviction and confidence into my words. "It just has to." I don't know if I was trying to convince the Ridgefolk or myself.

The elders remained silent for what seemed like forever. I had just about lost any hope of their helping us, when someone spoke up next to me.

"He gave it to us," Thandiwe said quietly.

When I looked over, anger was written all over her face. "Anansi. He waltzed in here, with his charm and his compliments, and presented the Story Box to us. 'A gift,' he said. 'For better relations,' he said. It was a trick!" She spat the words out with a scowl. "Coward. He was running away!"

Thandiwe glanced at me, then turned to the elders. "Honored ancestors, we must return Nyame's Story Box to its rightful place. Let the warriors of MidPass take it back, find Anansi, and make their homes safe again. We would want the same for ourselves."

Shouts of agreement echoed throughout the mountain, growing louder as more children and adults yelled their approval. The chorus grew to a rolling thunder of support, and it felt as if Isihlangu was shaking beneath our feet.

The chief elder turned to the other spirits of the Ridgefolk and conferred. I stepped back next to Ayanna and Chestnutt, and Gum Baby sat up groggily and peered up at me.

“Wha—what happened? What’s all the noise about?”

I smiled. “Because you’re awesome, that’s what.”

“Oh.” She yawned. “Tell Gum Baby something she don’t already know.”

I snorted, and Ayanna and Chestnutt laughed. Thandiwe overheard and rolled her eyes as well. She started to say something, but the ancestors broke their ghostly huddle and returned to their floating semicircle.

“It is decided.” The chief elder held up his hands for complete silence, then nodded. “We will—”

A chest-thumping roar shook the mountain, sending dust trickling down on everyone’s heads.

We all froze.

Then a little girl sitting on her father’s shoulders pointed at something above us and screamed. More people in the crowd began shouting and gesturing as well.

Ayanna’s eyes grew huge. She grabbed my shoulders and shouted, “Tristan!”

I whirled around, ready for anything.

Well, almost anything.

# 33
# ABIYOYO

**“HOW…? WHAT…IS THAT?”**

Ayanna shoved me forward. “Stop yammering and fix it! You called him, you send him away!”

The giant shadow of Abiyoyo was stomping around the back of the stage. It swiped at the ancestral spirits, trying to claw their shimmering forms.

“Don’t worry!” I called out. “It’s just a—”

An arm slashed down viciously, and Ayanna barreled into my shoulder, sending us tumbling.

Deep claw marks gouged the obsidian stage where we’d just been standing.

“Just a what, flyboy?” Ayanna grunted as she stood up. “Just a story?”

I shook my head in disbelief as Abiyoyo roared another challenge. The elders tried to flee, but they seemed tethered in place. The Ridgefolk surrounding the stage scattered left and right, fleeing back to the safety of their homes.

“Tristan!” Ayanna shouted. “Do something!”

“Do what?” I yelled back. My hands felt like they’d fallen asleep with the story still tingling inside of them, and I shook them as I searched for a solution. The charms on my bracelet jingled. I could definitely use their help now….

Wait. Anansi's story thread. I could still feel it—the rhythm. Normally, it faded after I finished shaping a story. But now…electric energy still pounded up my spine and down to my fingertips. Abiyoyo's story wasn't complete.

"Gum Baby, let's go!" I shouted, picking her up and setting her on my shoulder. Then I sprinted across the stage toward where Abiyoyo stalked the Amagqirha.

The Amagqirha held her beaded skirt off the floor and circled the stage in a half-run, keeping the ancestors connected to us as Abiyoyo chased her, stomping and clawing as he went. I dodged between ancestors, apologizing as I ran through their ghostly chairs and stools.

Someone joined me, and I glanced over to see Thandiwe joining the pursuit, her spear drawn.

"Why doesn't she break the connection?" I shouted. "Can't she, I don't know, hang up the spirit phone?" The Amagqirha continued to speak in her humming voice, naming the elders and their lineages. She hopped over one of the guards' kieries and dashed to the other side of the stage, all without losing concentration.

Impressive.

"Gum Baby," I shouted, still running. "I have a plan! Can you slow down the monster?"

"Gum Baby ain't—"

"The feet—throw sap at its feet!"

On cue, the giant tried to stomp on the Amagqirha. Gum Baby made an *Oh!* face, then saluted, flinging sap everywhere.

"Ooh, Gum Baby understands. Gum Baby picking up what you're putting down. She smells what you're cooking. Gum Baby hears—"

"Gum Baby! Just do it!"

"Oh, right!" She hopped off my shoulder and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hey, dusty feet! Down here. Yeah, right here, big boy. You like stepping on folks? Step on this. Sap attack!"

Sap splattered across the stage, and Gum Baby cartwheeled away. Abiyoyo slowed to a stop, frustrated by the Amagqirha's surprising nimbleness, and his beady eyes swiveled toward the tiny loudmouth. He lumbered after her, but when a blurry foot stepped into one of Gum Baby's sticky traps, he was caught fast. I saw my chance.

“Hey!” I shouted. The rhythm tingled as I pulled small toddler-like shadows from the corners of the mountain. I dressed them in glittering clothes made of silver dust and sent them skipping around the giant’s ink-black feet.

“What are you doing?” Ayanna shouted, cowering under a rocky ledge and cradling Chestnutt. “Children? You’re sending children against a giant?”

“Trust me,” I said. “Do you remember how to keep him away?”

“Tristan—”

“I’m serious!”

Abiyoyo strained, and with a wrenching twist and another roar, he pulled free of the sap.

Thandiwe stopped short behind me. “Um, it was—oh elders, help us—it was…the lullaby!” She snapped her fingers. “We sang it every night.”

“Right!” I said. More and more shadow children danced out of the corners of Isihlangu. They pranced and whirled in circles around the stage. I gasped from the effort and dropped to a knee. “We need everyone in the mountain to help. It’s the only way.”

“Everyone?” Thandiwe asked.

“Everyone. You all spread the word. I’ll keep him distracted here.” Before Ayanna and Thandiwe could argue, I ran to the center of the stage. The little shadow children parted before me and then followed, skipping along.

I hoped this would work.

“Abiyoyo!” I shouted, my hands cupped around my mouth.

The giant paused his efforts to scoop the shadow children into his mouth.

“Abiyoyo!”

Every time I shouted his name, he flinched, like hearing it caused him pain.

Abiyoyo’s story is pretty simple. Parents make their children sing his name softly over and over every night before they go to bed, and then it’s lights-out, don’t make a sound. If you don’t obey and go to sleep, the hungry giant will stomp to your house and steal you. And he won’t be taking you to play hide-and-seek.

More like fry-and-eat, you get me?

I was betting everything on that lullaby.

The shadow children linked arms and danced in a giant circle around the stage, with a second circle and then yet another inside of the first. Each ring moved in a different direction until a dizzying black-and-silver spiral swirled around us. It left the two of us, the giant and me, face-to-face. Beady silver eyes to handsome, intelligent brown eyes. Super-sharp silver teeth to…well, I brushed my teeth pretty well. Most nights.

ANYWAY…

Abiyoyo spun around with a confused roar. He probably couldn't choose which kid to snack on first. Before he made up his mind, I had the shadow children cup their hands around their silent mouths.

"Now, Ayanna!" I shouted.

High above us, Ayanna clung to Thandiwe's back as they rode up through the mountain on the warrior girl's forebear. At my signal, Ayanna waved frantically at people's doors, and Thandiwe called to them.

None of them opened.

Abiyoyo roared a challenge and stomped toward me. His silver claws scraped stone as he stretched out to grab me, and drops of black drool sizzled as his mouth opened wide to swallow me whole. I flinched out of reach.

"Abiyoyo!"

Claws the size of my arm barely missed slicing me like a loaf of bread. Abiyoyo jerked away as the mountain echoed with his name. The shadow children continued to spin in circles, and as soon as I realized I was still in one piece, I sent them twirling faster and faster.

"Abiyoyo!"

This time my call was echoed above me. Boys and girls stood in their open doorways and shouted at the giant. Even some of their parents and grandparents got into the act.

"ABIYOYO!"

The giant backed away, but my shadow children kept him hemmed in so he couldn't escape. They leaped onto one another's shoulders and swarmed him as now the entire mountain—ghostly ancestors, Ridgefolk, Midfolk, and a boy from Chicago—shouted the giant into submission.

**"ABIYOYO!"**

With a final roar, the giant splintered into a million tiny fragments of darkness. The mountain folk erupted in a giant cheer. I sagged onto the stone stage floor. The shadow children scampered like kids chasing bubbles,

hunting down every last piece of the monster and clutching it tight. They bounced over to me, hopping up and down with pride, and I chuckled wearily.

"Yeah, all right, y'all did good."

"No," a voice said behind me. Ayanna leaped off the forebear as Thandiwe came to a stop. They both ran over, whooping and hollering along with the rest of the Ridgefolk. "*You* did good," Ayanna said. "That was amazing!"

Thandiwe smiled and punched my shoulder. "Not bad, thief."

I smiled and pretended my shoulder didn't hurt. "Thanks."

"Ahem." Someone cleared their throat, and we turned to see the elders gazing at the shadow children.

"Oh, right," I said. I closed my eyes and concentrated, willing the children back to their homes in dark corners and under the moonless sky. With a rush of air, like a balloon released from your hands, the tiny silver-and-black toddlers skipped away, until only one was left. It waved at Gum Baby then dove into the shadow of my leg.

"That was great, Tristan," Gum Baby crowed. "Did you see that giant fall back? He was like, *Oh no, don't, y'all too strong, especially you, Gum Baby, you're really talented and should be cheered, raaaaahhhhhh.*"

I grinned and Ayanna shook her head. Chestnutt hopped over and she and Gum Baby excitedly recounted what had just happened.

The elders and the Amagqirha gathered around, and everybody grew silent.

"Your efforts were admirable," Fezile said. "You have proven yourself to be a true Anansesem. Perhaps…a bit more than was necessary. But, because of this, it is clear to us that the Midfolk need Nyame's treasure." The chief elder stared grimly around the chamber. "If childhood stories can be corrupted even here, at the top of Isihlangu, that gash in the sky is indeed a threat to us. Bring the Story Box!"

At his command, two guards zoomed upward on their hoverboards.

"Thank you, honored ancestors," I said, bowing low. "I won't let you down."

As we waited for the guards to return with the Box, I rocked back and forth on my feet with excitement. Finally, after searching for so long, we were close to being able to fix the damage I'd caused. Once we snared Anansi and convinced him to close up the tear in the sky, the gods and

heroes could work together to defeat the iron monsters once and for all. Then it was back to my world.

Within just a few minutes the guards emerged from the crowd, gliding on their forebears, carrying something covered in cloth between them on a little stretcher.

The chief elder nodded, and the guards set the object down in front of me. “Well, go on, Anansesem,” he said. “Behold your prize.”

The Story Box awaited.

I grinned and reached for the cloth—

—and a sudden electric spike shot through me.

I whirled around. Something had just stepped onto the stage. No, some*one*.

“Tristan? What’s wrong?” Ayanna scrunched up her forehead in confusion.

But I couldn’t explain it. A person had stepped *out of nothingness* and stood behind the ancestors, watching us.

Watching *me*.

His face was obscured by the hood of a long cloak, and I swallowed as he began to make his way over to me. Who was this? Another story I had forgotten to dismiss? I racked my brain, trying to imagine who I might have called into this world.

“Tristan? Aren’t you going to—?”

“I’m afraid he can’t rightly do that, Miss Ayanna. Not at all.”

The smooth voice had notes of sadness and joy. Like someone getting ready to laugh or cry or both. It made me want to dance and shout, and I could hear tinkling instruments somewhere in the distance as the man stepped into view. He was large—taller than me, but not quite John Henry’s size. Once he pushed back his hood, I saw that he had a smooth brown face, dimples that threatened to pull out a wide smile, and tight curly hair so black it shone.

He winked at Ayanna and said, “But I’ll take it, sure enough. I’ll take it and be on my way, if it pleases you.”

The energy rippling off this dude was jaw-dropping. The tingling sensation I normally got in my fingers now stormed through my whole body, like just being near him would make every story funnier and more memorable.

“Who are you?” I squeezed out through gritted teeth. Powerful or not, I wasn’t giving up that Story Box. Not now. Not after everything the crew and I had been through. No way, nohow.

“Oh.” The man actually had the nerve to be surprised, as if I should know him already.

And…everyone *did* seem to know him already. Ayanna’s mouth was open so wide I thought I might trip over her chin. Chestnutt trembled as the man walked to center stage to grin cheekily at me. And Gum Baby…

“Well, sap Gum Baby down and stick her to a wall. Is that who I think it is?”

The man laughed, a bright and contagious sound that had me smiling along before I could catch myself. “Well, if it ain’t GB. How’s it flowing?”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “You all know this guy?” Ayanna nodded, but it was Gum Baby who answered. “Sure do! One of Gum Baby’s best students. This is—”

“My name,” the man said, “is John, but”—he held out a hand—“you can call me High John.”

# 34
# HIGH JOHN

**WHEN SCHOOL FIRST STARTED, I** ate lunch in the library all the time. Monday through Friday you could find me huddled behind a large stack of science-fiction novels, scarfing down a turkey-and-cheese sandwich. I didn't know anyone well enough to sit with them, and lunchtime was a loud mess of cliques and conflicts. No slick comments meant no quick tempers, which meant no even quicker fists. It was best for me to avoid all that.

So I went to our library. The librarian was cool—Mrs. Timmons. She would even let me borrow more books than I was supposed to, because we both loved mythology stories. Gods or demigods or heroes? Sign me up. Funny, right?

One day I devoured my lunch so I could spend the remaining eighteen minutes devouring the latest graphic novel about some caped superhero— can't remember which one—when a reedy voice interrupted me in the middle of a full-battle spread.

"That book is dumb."

The voice came from behind the stack of books on the table. I leaned to the side to see, sitting across from me, a short, scrawny Black boy with a do-it-yourself haircut, thick red-and-black-framed glasses, super-baggy cargo shorts, and a Malcolm X T-shirt.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, and went back to my book.

This kid had the nerve to keep talking. “I’m serious. Gimmicks and overpowered, square-jawed jocks. Miss me with that. And the villains are so over-the-top!”

Mrs. Timmons glanced over at us with a frown and I glared at the boy. “Okay, cool.” Then I stuck my nose in the book and tried to ignore him.

He was rude enough to scoot his chair around so he could look over my shoulder. I was too flabbergasted to get angry. You know what Nana calls people like him? *Space invaders.* Continually pushing into your personal bubble until you pop. But before I could put him in his place, he held out his hand.

“Edward Garvey. Like Marcus Garvey, except Edward. But everyone calls me Eddie. I just started here this week.”

Oh. I mean, what are you supposed to do with that?

I shook his hand. “Tristan,” I muttered.

“Cool. But, yo, seriously. That book is dumb.”

I sighed, marked my place with a piece of scrap paper, then leaned back in the chair and studied the kid. He had an earnest, honest expression, like he really expected me to debate him on this, when all I really wanted to do was tell him to scram. But…I didn’t for some reason.

Maybe it was the look.

You know what I’m talking about. That look kids have when they’re trying to make friends and aren’t sure how they’re being received. Hopeful. Anxious. Nervous.

He fiddled with the straps on his book bag and stared at me. *Everybody has a story,* Nana used to say when I was younger. *Listen to it, and they’ll be friendly. Engage with it, and they’ll be your friend.*

Fine.

“So this is dumb,” I said, nodding at the graphic novel.

“Yup.”

“And I guess you got something better?”

Eddie’s eyes lit up. “Only the strongest, smoothest, wildest hero ever. Rides a crow the size of a Cadillac truck—no, a stretch limo! He even has his own walk-up music—they say drums play when he walks.”

He started tapping a rhythm on the desk and I started nodding along before I could stop myself. This kid wasn’t so bad. He could lay down a pretty solid beat, and besides, I knew where he was heading.

“He used to be a prince,” Eddie continued. “In Africa. But he got captured and was forced into slavery. His name—”

“—is High John,” I said, cutting him off. “High John the Conqueror.”

Eddie’s eyes nearly bugged out of his skull. “You know the stories?” I shrugged. “My grandmother used to tell them.”

“Yo, that’s so cool! You know those aren’t really written down anywhere? They were passed along by word of mouth. Does your grandmother know any other stories?”

“She knows *all* the stories. Trust me. I’ve been hearing them since I was a baby.”

Eddie basically dove into his backpack—while still wearing it, which was impressive—and pulled out a battered leather journal. I wrinkled my nose. It smelled like old hot dogs that had been left in the sun. A strange tassel hung from the top of the book—a worn leather cord, frayed and tied back together in several spots.

“You think she’d tell me some?” He stared at me with a serious look, biting his lip while opening and closing the cover of the journal.

“What?”

“Do you think, if you asked her, your grandmother would tell me some? I collect old folktales and stuff like that.”

“Why?” I asked. That didn’t seem like the sort of thing a normal seventh grader would do.

“Because. Someone has to. Why not me? I like them. I even got a few drawings of some of the heroes. See? Here’s High John. And here’s John Henry. He’s cool, too, but mostly I love his hammer. And this…”

His drawings were pretty good, I had to admit. Soon we were both huddled over his journal, arguing over what-ifs and team battles. We were both late to our next period, but somehow it didn’t matter.

That was the day I’d met my best friend.

High John or High John the Conqueror or John de Conquer.

All names for one of the most fascinating folk heroes I’d ever heard of. John Henry may have been powerful, but High John was power personified.

Now the legend himself—Eddie’s favorite—stood there, dressed like the uncle who’s always the loudest at the family picnic. Pants a little too short to reach the top of his high-top sandals. Butterfly-collar shirt only

halfway buttoned, and peeking out from beneath it was a small drawstring pouch hanging from a cord around his neck.

High John noticed my eyes and smiled, then tucked the pouch back inside his shirt. He stretched and cracked his neck. “We ain’t got time to chew the fat. Grab that Story Box for me, will you?”

Ayanna bit her lip. Chestnutt’s ears drooped so low they covered her eyes, and Gum Baby looked confused. No one wanted to say anything, and you know what that meant.

Yep.

I had to be the one.

“Mr. High John—”

“Just High John,” he interrupted with a smile. “Only Mister I knew cracked whips, and I ain’t him.”

“Right,” I said, flustered. “High John—”

“But we ain’t got time for chitchat right now.” He walked over and threw an arm around my shoulders, flashing a wide grin at the others on the stage. “Young Tristan here has done a great job so far, but I reckon it’s time to put a little hot sauce on the wheels.”

He waited, but when everyone—including the elders, still sitting on their spirit stools—stared at him blankly, I sighed. Adults and their strange figures of speech. “He’s saying he wants us to hurry,” I explained to the room before turning to High John. “But that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I got this. Nyame told us—”

“Nyame?” High John snorted. “He still ain’t right, is he? Still got the bug juice in his veins.”

Thandiwe frowned. “Bug juice?”

“Brand flies,” I said, slightly distracted. High John’s comment bothered me, but I tried to push past it. “And I’m sorry, High John, but we’re taking the Story Box back with us. It’s the only shot we have at saving MidPass!”

“MidPass?” High John looked around in disbelief. “Y’all think…? Oh, no, no, no.” His arm slipped off my shoulder and he moved to the center of the stage, one hand on his hip and the other pinching the bridge of his nose. “Ain’t no saving MidPass—y’all might as well get that outta your heads. It’s gone. Done for. If not today, then tomorrow. Them monsters done surely chewed through that place by now.”

His words hit me like a jab to the chin.

“What do you mean, *gone*?”

“I mean gone. Them folks either packed up or they dead. Ain’t nobody moving in MidPass now except for fetterlings.”

An icy chill swept through Isihlangu, and nobody spoke for several heartbeats. Chestnutt broke the silence with a sniffle, and she collapsed against Ayanna’s legs. Gum Baby tried to form a sentence, but nothing came out. Thandiwe and the Amagqirha pressed their lips tight together.

“So,” High John said, staring at me, “what we’ve got to do, if we don’t want the same thing that happened to the Golden Crescent and MidPass happening here? We’ve got to take the fight to them.”

“But—”

“But nothing, boy, I’m trying to save lives! What? You still fixed on the words of one Alkean god?”

A wave of despair washed over me. The division between the countries was going to destroy everyone before the iron monsters could! High John was one folk hero god who maybe could’ve bridged the gap. But he didn’t seem to respect Nyame or care about MidPass.

It was just so *frustrating*!

A small crowd of onlookers had gathered again, and they muttered among themselves, but I ignored the mounting tension. A growing, wiggling tentacle of doubt wouldn’t let me completely believe High John’s words. MidPass gone? No way. John Henry wouldn’t let that happen. We were just there yesterday. Yeah, okay, the Thicket had been under assault, and yeah, things had looked bad, but Miss Sarah and Miss Rose, and Brer and John Henry, they wouldn’t allow Midfolk to get taken.

Not unless…

A sharp inhale sounded next to me. I looked over to see Ayanna holding a hand over her mouth. She’d arrived at the same thought.

“They’re okay,” I assured her. “They’ve gotta be okay.” “Perhaps,”

the chief elder broke in, “it would be best to move this discussion and—”

“Naw, ain’t no need to move, ’cause there ain’t no discussion.” High John shoved both hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. “Is there, Tristan?”

Everyone looked at me. High John raised an eyebrow and waited, and a flush of hot anger burned my face. I hated being put on the spot.

Bad things always happened when I got put on the spot.

Hardheaded things.

I was just about to snap off a remark Nana would have something to say about (you know they can hear you across the street, city, or world, no matter where you're at) when the wiggling little thought that had been bothering me this whole time finally wriggled free.

"How do you know everyone in MidPass is gone?" I asked slowly. High John groaned. "We ain't got time for—"

"No. How do you know they're gone?" "I just know."

Chestnutt poked her head up. "Tristan, what is it?"

I pointed at him. "This dude comes out of nowhere saying it's over for MidPass and there's no need to go back there. How do we know? Y'all just trust him? He could be—"

"I could be what?" High John said with an easy smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Lying? Pulling a fast one? That'd be a mighty low thing for me to do, wouldn't you say?"

I glared at him. Ayanna started to interject, but I ignored her. "All I know is I haven't seen you at all before now, but as soon as Nyame's Story Box comes out of hiding, you pop up. Nah, I don't like it. I don't like it one bit." I turned to Ayanna and jerked my head at the door. "Come on, let's go. We've got a country to save."

Her eyes widened. I turned to see High John stalking over. Before I could say anything, he had crossed the stage in three steps and grabbed the front of my collar in his fist.

"Hey, get your hands—"

But he yanked hard, and I felt something rip. My chest—he was ripping my chest. Wait, no, he was pulling me out of my…What in the…? Everything looked blurry and upside down. A wordless scream spilled out of my mouth and the world went black.

# 35
# A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

**AIR WHISTLED PAST MY FACE.**

Before I even opened my eyes, I knew we were moving. I lay flat on my back and the rushing winds tugged at the adinkra charms on my wrist. I rolled over to cover them with my other hand, but the floor felt weird. It was soft. Not like a carpet or that fancy rug Mom didn't let anyone step on. No, it felt like fur or…

I opened my eyes and immediately closed them again.

Sweet peaches.

"If you're gonna empty your stomach, best to turn outta the wind," High John said from somewhere off in the distance. "Otherwise you gonna get a face full of nasty."

"I'm not going to throw up," I said, gritting my teeth. "I just…need a second."

"Take all the time you want, boy. Ain't going nowhere but in circles." He sounded sincere, which only made me more determined to get up. I swallowed the lump of sour fear in my throat and forced my eyes open. Glossy black feathers the length of my forearm fluttered in the wind, and I glared at them, then got up on wobbly legs.

I stood on the back of a giant bird—a crow, I think—as big as a private jet. Its wings moved up and down with long, massive flaps that swept away

the clouds we were flying through. I couldn't even see the tips of each wing. Every now and then it cawed, a loud, shrill cry that made me flinch.

"There he is, right as rain."

I turned—slowly—to find High John watching me from near the bird's head. His hands were in his pockets, and he smiled, all traces of his earlier anger gone. "Surprised me, boy," he said. "Most don't take to Old Familiar their first go-round."

"Familiar?" I asked, while inching closer. Baby steps. Itty-bitty baby steps.

High John squatted and patted the crow's neck feathers. "This old man right here. Been with me for…Shoot, I don't rightly know anymore. But he's carried more souls than there are stars in the sky, and he's still going strong. Ain't that right, sir?"

Familiar cawed again, and I swallowed.

"Souls? Am…am I—?"

"Shoot, no. You just stepped outside."

"Outside?"

"Of yourself. I had to give you a little tug, but that happens." "What do you mean I'm outside of myself?" I asked, once Familiar leveled out. "Where are we? Last thing I remember is you getting mad and yanking my collar."

High John's face grew serious. "Had to do something. Some things ain't meant to be heard by everybody. Too many people hear a thing, and that thing takes on a life of its own."

I shook my head. "You're not making any sense."

High John pursed his lips. "You called me a liar. I may be many things, boy, but a liar? Not High John. No, sir."

"I'm sorry I said that. It's just that—"

He ignored me and kept on talking. "You the one who's lyin'. You supposed to be a master storyteller, right? Got all these Alkeans in a fuss 'cause of some tales you can bring to life."

"So?"

"So you know how stories can grow and change over time. Guesses can become rumors can become legends can become reality. Let a few people think there's hope, and all of a sudden a bad situation gets worse." High John stabbed a finger at me, then pointed down. "Them folk, all of them on MidPass, they're done for, boy. You've been blessed. Several times. Got

gods over here and gods over there giving you protections and charms. Well, I'm gonna give you something, too. I'm gonna give you two gifts. The first is advice: Quit living in the past. Ain't nothing back there that you can save."

He looked me in the eyes as he said that, and somehow it felt like he wasn't just talking about the Midfolk. He was talking about Eddie, too. I swallowed and looked away.

"Now, for the second."

High John waved his hand, and like fog lifting when the sun rose in the sky, the clouds faded away into nothing. He motioned me forward, and I reluctantly inched closer and looked over the side of the giant crow.

"Sweet peaches," I gasped.

High John grinned. "Gets me every time. Welcome to Alke, boy." The last wispy cloud disappeared as the world of Alke emerged like a jewel beneath us.

We were high in the air—so high my heart climbed into my throat and stayed there—and yet the different lands appeared sharp and focused, like I had zoomed in on a map. I asked High John about that and he laughed.

"That's Old Familiar. It's amazing what you gon' see when you step outside yourself. Old Familiar helps with the perspective, yes he do." He pointed at a shining golden sliver of land. "See that? That's the Golden Crescent. Now, right behind it is where we just was, the Ridge, or Isihlangu, as they say. That thang glitters like black diamonds, boy, it sure do. Now, behind that—"

"Why'd you bring me up here?" I interrupted. My eyes were glued to an island hidden beneath charcoal-gray clouds of smoke. Every so often I thought I saw flashes, like lightning jumping around during a thunderstorm.

High John grunted. "Like I said, boy, perspective."

"Is that MidPass?" I already knew the answer, but I needed to hear it. "Sure is."

"Can we get closer?"

"I ain't bring you up here to watch them folks get harassed and stripped from their homes. I brought you here 'cause you asked how I knew. You look at that and tell me that place ain't finished."

My fists clenched, but I forced them to relax, and as much as I wanted to snap, to point at the burning land and scream, I didn't. It took some

effort, but I did it. Mr. Richardson would've been proud. "You know, Nana —my grandmother—used to tell me stories about you."

High John preened like a peacock. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She told me that you were the strongest of all the folk heroes, and you were a man of the people. Anytime one of us suffered, you could feel it and would be there in an instant. Comforting. Helping."

I turned and faced him, looking him in his eye. The smile froze on his face.

"So," I asked, "why aren't you helping
them?" "Now look, Tristan, it ain't that
simple…." "Are you a god or aren't you?"
"I can't just—"
"Are you a god or aren't you?"
"I need to be called upon. I can't just show up
like—" "Are you. A god. Or not?"

In a blur of motion he was standing in front of me. My shirt was in his fists and I was hoisted high in the air. "Do you think I want to see my country die?" he exploded.

His voice was crashing ocean waves and shaking earth. Old trees and Mississippi suns. Auction houses and Congo landings.

I didn't recognize any of the images and yet I knew them all.

Old Familiar cawed at the waves of energy coming off High John's fury. I swallowed but didn't look away. He held me there for a second longer, my feet dangling a mile above Alke, and I didn't doubt for a second that— outside myself or not—if he dropped me, I wouldn't be waking up again. Then something in his face changed, and High John sighed and set me down.

"Those are my friends. You think I want to see them dragged off? My home burned and desecrated? I don't. But if I go back there as I am right now, I don't have a burp's chance in a whirlwind of making a difference. You know that. Those monsters want us to fight. They snatching folk up left and right, no matter how hard John Henry swings that hammer or how many Rose and Sarah try to save. They too strong."

He gripped my shoulder and stared at me. "That's why I need that Story Box, Tristan. With it, I could get stronger. Way stronger."

"How?"

“The Story Box is power, Tristan. All them tales, they’re the strength of gods. They feed us, give us energy. Why do you think Nyame hoards them? Why you think them iron monsters is hauling us all back into the belly of that monster? Power, boy! It’s all about power. You control the story, you control the narrative, you control power.”

Anansi’s research flashed in my mind. The dismantled fetterlings. The notes. The diagrams. “That’s what he was looking for…” I said slowly.

“What?”

“Anansi. He—Never mind. If these Story Boxes are so powerful, why doesn’t MidPass have one?”

High John let go of me and made a disgusted noise in his throat. “’Cause we’re the new kids ’round town. ’Cause we’re different. ’Cause the sky is up, who knows? But we don’t, and now that we have the chance to get our hands on one, I’m not giving it up.”

I shook my head. “We need it to lure Anansi—”

He grunted. “Anansi? You pinning our lives on one Alkean god? What makes you think he gonna help? What has he done so far? He down there putting out flames or fighting?”

“Are you?”

“Aw, here you go. I see.” High John took a step back. “I see. Am I helping? I *AM* HELPING!” He pounded his chest. “I’m trying to become as strong as them iron monsters, so I can do some snatchin’ of my own.”

I huffed impatiently. What more could I say to convince him to do the right thing?

High John snorted. “You wanna get closer? Okay, let’s get closer. Let’s have us a little look-see, boy.”

He snarled something I didn’t quite catch to Old Familiar, and the crow cawed once and began to turn. I thought we were going to glide down, but High John grabbed my collar again, and without another word, he stepped off the crow’s back, pulling me with him.

# 36
# THE MAN OF FIRE AND SMOKE

**MY STOMACH ROSE INTO MY** throat to join my heart in a town house of terror, and I closed my eyes, but before I could scream, I felt solid ground beneath my feet. I opened my eyes, stumbled a little, and almost choked.

The Thicket was burning in a bonfire the size of a mountain.

We stood in the middle of the forest glade where I'd first met John Henry. But instead of peace and tranquility, chaos and mayhem greeted us. Midfolk ran screaming left and right as patches of the thorny ceiling fell to the ground in explosions of heat and sparks. A mother was fleeing with one child over her shoulder and another holding her hand, and they zigged around a burning section of grass and came right at us. Before I could shout a warning, they dashed through me like I wasn't there and headed for an exit in the back wall.

"What…what happened?" I asked, shaken and confused.

"You ain't really here," High John answered. He sat atop a fallen tree that still smoldered, studying his fingernails. "Stepped outside yourself, remember? But you wanted to look, so go ahead. Get a good look."

"Aren't you going to help?" I asked. Misery filled me as a group of Midfolk hustled away from the flames and into the glowing night.

"I am, boy." He pointed high above us, where flames and smoke were being drawn through a hole in the glade ceiling. "Old Familiar is sucking up

them flames as we speak. But that's about all I got. Can't do much in this form, and I can't step back into myself here, 'cause that would leave you untethered. You already ain't got much time—if you humans spend too long outside yourselves, you liable to stay that way. You don't wanna be a haint forever, do you?"

A shiver rippled down my spine. "There's got to be something we can do to help them," I said. I jogged over to the people and animals crowding around an exit. A little boy dropped a cloth bundle and scampered after it, and I stooped to pick it up at the same time he did. His finger slid right through mine, and he paused to look around. Someone called him, and he snatched the bundle and scampered back to his place in line.

"Everyone out the back!" A familiar voice boomed above the chaos. John Henry strode by, the ground shaking as he cut a path through the glade. His hammer pointed toward the back wall. The symbols on its handle—adinkra, I realized with a surprise—glowed almost as bright as the fire.

"Out the back and stay with your groups!"

A faint scream cut through the night.

I looked around. There were more shrieks, and I waited to see someone rush off to help them, but no one did.

"Nobody can hear them," I whispered. I turned around and started running before I remembered my body wasn't physically there. The cries came again, and nobody seemed to hear them but me, not over John Henry's roars, so I kept running.

I left the glade and plunged into the winding tunnels of the Thicket. Smoke and heat didn't bother me in my ghostly form, so I ran on. I couldn't see, but the screams were coming faster now, from the direction of the auditorium. When I arrived, I lunged through the wide doorway and skidded to a stop.

Two rusty fetterlings, screeching and clanking, had cornered a group of older children, like foxes herding chickens. The biggest girl was valiantly trying to ward off the monsters with a straw broom while the rest of the kids cried or screamed.

One of the fetterlings dashed forward, the shackles on its arms snapping for a boy, and I shouted, "NO!"

Before I thought about what I was about to do, and if it was even possible, I was doing it. I pulled smoke and flame from outside the hallway and shaped it into a tall man. The movements were hard to do in my current

condition, like trying to walk through water. Several times I thought I'd lose the thread of the story, and only sheer effort kept it going.

*Once there was a prince from Africa.*

The man of fire and smoke stalked forward. The kids saw him first and begin to scream even louder. The iron monsters rattled when the man got between them and the children.

*His walk was rhythm and his words were pride.*

The fetterlings snapped in vain at my creation. I made him point at the children, then at the door, and the letters *G-O* appeared in smoke above his fingertips. A few kids recognized the word, and, with some convincing, got the rest of the group up and moving. The oldest girl kept her broom up as she hustled her companions toward the door. The fetterlings hissed in anger, and I could barely control my movements now, but I had enough energy left for one last command.

*Sold into slavery, he helped those who couldn't help themselves.*

The man of fire and smoke took two large steps forward and exploded into a vortex of heat and wind. The fetterlings were swept up and carried the length of the auditorium, until they smashed against the thorny back wall.

My legs trembled beneath me, and I began to fall over sideways, and suddenly High John was there. "Time to go, stupid boy."

"No," I said, shivering uncontrollably. "There's more…we can do."

"Come on. Any longer and you fixin' to fade away. Look." He pointed at my hands as he dragged me out toward Old Familiar, and I watched with growing horror as their dark brown color slowly turned transparent.

And yet…

"One…more thing," I gasped.

John Henry was still ushering people out of the burning Thicket entrance, and I concentrated as hard as I could. I needed to get this right. I needed to…

The man of fire and smoke appeared again, and several people screamed. John Henry flinched and whirled around, hammer raised. Then he paused at the sight of the apparition floating in midair. "High John," he muttered.

The fire man pointed at an adinkra swirling out of the flames next to him—the Gye Nyame. John Henry's eyes narrowed at the symbol, then he

nodded sharply, and I let the image disappear. I hoped he'd gotten the message.

My arm was nearly invisible now. High John picked me up and climbed into the air as if on hidden stairs. Then we were back on Old Familiar. High John spoke again in that language of dancing slaves and hidden meanings, and the giant black crow cawed and flapped into the sky.

I was colder than I'd ever been, even during the most brutal Chicago winter. My shivering wouldn't stop, and my bones rattled. I couldn't feel my toes or my hands, and I just wanted to lie down and sleep. My eyes closed.

"Tristan?" High John called.

"Yeah?" I mumbled.

"That man you conjured out of fire and smoke…is that how I look? Is that…is that how you see me when you tell your stories?"

I tried to answer. I tried to tell him about Eddie and how he could spin a High John tale that would rival any superhero story. About fighting injustice, and doing it with a laugh and a dance. But all I could do was close my eyes.

"Tristan? Tristan!"

# 37
# MISSING MEMORIES

**“I’M DISAPPOINTED IN YOU, TRISTAN.”**

I was back in the dark, moldy hallway with two torches floating alongside me. My feet walked forward automatically, and a voice slinked out of the shadows.

“Real disappointed.”

“Yeah, well, get in line,” I muttered. “Disappointing people is kind of my thing.”

More victims were chained against the walls now. Midfolk and Alkeans. They were crammed against one another and, just like last time, I couldn’t stop to try to help them—my feet moved me past until finally I arrived at that same rotted wooden door.

Inside, the old lantern hissed before the flame flickered to life, just barely. More of those blurry, shriveled white flowers recoiled out of the thin light, rolling to the far corner, where something moved. It was like seeing something out the corner of your eye and never quite getting a good look at it. Just a shadow, and yet something more.

Uncle C.

“I told you I’d come for you,” the haint said. He almost sounded apologetic. “I told you, and you didn’t listen. Now your precious hideout is

burning, and I'm gonna hunt down all your little friends and put all their miserable hides with the rest of my collection."

His voice lowered to a hiss that merged with the lantern's struggling flame. "I asked for *one* thing. One! And you trying to play me like I can't take everything you love. You think it's a game? Maybe I been too lenient. Maybe you need some *inspiration.*"

The lantern flame finally sputtered out, and darkness flooded over me, carrying the sound of rustling and the smell of death. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and an invisible rope snaked around my arms and legs. I couldn't get away, or move at all, and a violent wind ripped past me, snatching and grabbing at my clothes. It whipped into my eyes and swirled around my head and…

An image of Eddie scribbling in his journal popped into my mind.

Another followed—this one of him laughing at some joke I'd just made.

More scenes appeared, and they swirled around my head, just like the wind, and…

And then…

They were out of reach. I could remember…something. I could feel the empty space where the memories used to be, but everything else, the specifics…they were gone.

Except for one.

A bus crash, a feeble hand reaching for

help… "What did you do?" I whispered.

"I will *end* you, boy," Uncle C hissed. "But before I do, I'm gonna make you suffer. I'm gonna rip away everything you hold dear. All the memories of your little friend? Mine now. The only picture you can cling to is of you *failing* to be a hero. And all them friends you made, all them gods with all their powers, they ain't gonna help you. I'm gonna pluck your recollections out, one by one, and leave you with nothing but dusssssst."

The hiss grew into a shout by the time he was finished. A great pressure, like the weight of the entire world, landed on my shoulders, and it took every ounce of my strength not to buckle under it and sink to the floor. It grew heavier and heavier, and just when I thought I couldn't take it any longer, Uncle C sighed and the weight disappeared.

"Unless…you give me what I want."

"What…is that?" I asked, exhausted.

“Aw, do I really gotta spell it out for you, boy? That fancy box everybody’s all in a tiff about. You bring that to me, and I’ll give back your precious little book, and nobody’s gotta get hurt. You hear me? It’s on you now, Tristan. Give me what I want, and you can save everybody.”

The Story Box? Everyone wanted the power of that thing. But why—?

Before I could respond, the invisible rope yanked at me again, and I was dragged backward out of the room, Uncle C’s last words following me into the hallway:

“You want to be a hero, right?”

And then I was back at the entrance, staring into the dark, two torches floating alongside me. I took a deep breath, then another, just as I heard an exasperated sigh.

“Hey, genius,” somebody said sadly. “You’re still talking to the wrong one.”

I squeezed my eyes tight. That voice sounded familiar. I knew it. I *knew* it. I…Eddie. It was Eddie’s voice. The haint had taken some of my dearest memories, but I clung to what I had left.

“I don’t know what that means,” I whispered. “Uncle C? Who? Who’s the wrong one?”

“You’re still talking to the wrong one.”

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS!” I shouted into the darkness.

The only answer was silence.

“Tristan?”

I opened my eyes to see Gum Baby’s head inches from mine. She held my face in one sticky hand, and the other was stretched behind her, as if she were seconds away from smacking the taste buds out my mouth.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t you dare—”

*SMACK!*

“Ow!” I yelled. “What was that for?”

“You wasn’t moving.” Gum Baby shrugged. “Ain’t no time for sleep, Bumbletongue, Gum Baby got missions and stuff.”

I slowly became aware that I was back on the polished stage inside Isihlangu. Not watching the Thicket burn. Not being threatened by Uncle C in a nightmare. I was in the Ridge.

Everyone was staring at me. The elders, the Amagqirha, Thandiwe… even Ayanna and Chestnutt were looking at me weirdly. High John stood apart from us with his arms crossed, in the same position he'd been in before, but now, instead of a smile, he wore a scowl. He met my eyes and I recoiled from the centuries-old fury roiling in his gaze. But just for a second, something else flickered there.

Confusion?

"Tristan, you all right?" Chestnutt asked.

I shook my head and tried to catch up mentally. My mind was foggy. I'd had a best friend once, back home…. What was his name again? Eddie? I vaguely remembered letting him down somehow. There'd been a lot of pain….

"Tristan?" Ayanna called.

I took a breath and pulled myself together. Apparently, no one had noticed that High John and I had disappeared for a while. In the stories, he took slaves' spirits on trips of happiness and joy and wonder, all while their bodies remained on the plantation and continued to work.

I guess that's what he'd done to me, though I couldn't say the trip was a happy one….

"Tristan!" Gum Baby shouted.

"What?"

"You standing there drooling, that's what! They about to hand over what we came for, and you like a frog on a log. And Gum Baby hates frogs. Are you even listening?" Gum Baby scrambled to my shoulder and grabbed my ear. "Can you hear Gum Baby? Oh, no wonder—you really need to clean your ears out."

"Hey!" I brushed her off and she slid down to the floor and folded her arms. I cleared my throat. "Sorry. I just…Sorry. Continue. I'm here—I mean, I'm listening."

Two Ridgefolk guards flanked a large, cloth-covered object. My throat tightened.

The chief elder stood, and so did the rest of the ancestors, the Amagqirha's humming chant still powering their ghostly presence. "As I was saying," Fezile said, "High John has relinquished his demand for Nyame's Story Box."

I gawked. High John shrugged, but anger still lined his face. Anger and embarrassment.

“Before we hand it over to you, champions of MidPass, a request must be honored. Thandiwe, step forward.”

The tall girl moved to the center of the stage and extended her hoverboard to the Amagqirha. The diviner tied something to its middle, all the while stepping from foot to foot and humming. When she was done, the older woman gave the forebear back to Thandiwe, slipping it on her arm like a—

“A shield?” I asked out loud. “Wait, why a shield?”

The answer hit me just as Thandiwe grinned and tied a beaded wrap around her head. “I shall be coming with you. Anansi owes all of Isihlangu an explanation.” She sniffed. “And to show you Midfolk how to fight, of course.”

Gum Baby rolled her eyes. “Girl, please.”

“Hush, Gum Baby,” Ayanna said, then she smiled at Thandiwe. The two had become fast friends since our arrival. Which made sense, ’cause they were a lot alike. “We need all the help we can get.”

“Then take the Story Box,” the chief elder commanded. “I hope your plans succeed. For all our sakes.”

The tone of the spirit’s voice caught my attention. It seemed like there was something he wasn’t telling us. Before I could ask any questions, however, the Amagqirha stopped moving and humming. The elders began to fade away. The oldest leaders of the Ridgefolk, still guiding and inspiring their people even after death, had stared at me with such intensity that it was almost a relief when they were gone.

“Well, y’all gonna open it?” High John’s drawl broke the spell.

I cleared my throat and nodded at Thandiwe. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

She shrugged. With an unceremonious yank, she pulled off the covering and tossed it aside.

Everyone gasped.

I’d expected a shining golden treasure chest, like the one in Chestnutt’s drawing.

Or a diamond-encrusted, velvet-lined case.

Even a fake leather trunk would’ve been acceptable.

High John gave an angry little snort and shook his head. He shoved his hands in his pockets and hopped down off the stage. “Yeah, y’all can keep all that.”

Gum Baby threw her little hands up with so much anger, sap flew across the stage. “What sort of soggy garbage is this mess?”

An old brown crate covered in layers of dust, with sagging hinges and a partially splintered lid, sat there. Thandiwe looked at each of us, puzzled. “You didn’t know? This is how Anansi brought it to us. It’s empty.”

# 38
# THE STORY BOX

**“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO** do?” Ayanna whispered to me.

We were at a long table—me, Ayanna, and Thandiwe. Gum Baby and Chestnutt sat on the surface and shared a plate of steaming carrots. They seemed oblivious to our disappointment. The sound of drums and singing and clapping kept our conversation from being overheard.

Why so loud?

Oh, well, turns out whenever the elders were summoned beneath Isihlangu, a feast was in order—never mind that it was because we had arrived as thieves in the night. I found myself staring at a plate of food I had no desire to eat as the entire mountain population celebrated around us.

And if you know me, you know a plate of food lying untouched in my presence is weird.

“Tristan?” Ayanna repeated, and I shook my head.

“Don’t know.”

Thandiwe watched both of us with a confused look. “I don’t understand. How did you not know Nyame’s Story Box was empty?”

I looked at Ayanna, who shrugged and sighed. “We never thought to ask,” I said.

“It’s not like we *could* ask,” Ayanna said, looking at Thandiwe and frowning accusingly. “You wouldn’t speak with us. You treated us like

beggars and thieves."

The warrior girl pointed a stew-covered spoon in our direction. "One of those labels is accurate, don't forget."

"Okay, okay," I cut in, not in the mood for another territorial fight. High John had done enough of that already. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"I think we should take it to Brer anyway, like we're supposed to," said Ayanna. "Maybe it will still bring Anansi…."

"You think Anansi will barter for a broken, dusty old crate?"

But Thandiwe didn't seem fazed. "What if you had it repaired?" she suggested.

Ayanna scoffed, but I ignored it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, bring it back to Nyame. It was his creation in the first place. Surely he could restore it. Maybe even refill it with stories. Then you take it on to MidPass and summon Anansi."

I chewed that over for a few seconds. "Brer did tell me to bring it right away, but…"

"But, like you said, there's no point in bringing an empty, broken Story Box," she finished.

I nodded. "Okay. Yes, let's get it fixed. Nyame owes us one, anyway." "He does?" Thandiwe raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because we—"

"Tristan freed him from iron-monster control," Ayanna interrupted. I straightened an imaginary tie and she snorted. "But don't talk about it around Tristan or his head will get even bigger."

"Who's got a big head? Bumbletongue?" Gum Baby shouted. She was out of her little chair on top of the table and was dancing around my plate to the celebratory drumbeat. Sticky purple drops of syrupy sap splattered my food. I groaned and pushed it away. Now I definitely didn't feel like eating. "Gum Baby been saying that. Boy's head is so big, we could use *it* to plug up the tear in the sky. Little bit of sap and a big ole head sounds like the answer. Gum Baby'll do it. Shoot, won't even cost you much. Just a new pair of boots and a smile."

"You don't even wear boots," I said, rolling my eyes as Thandiwe, Ayanna, and Chestnutt laughed at me.

*"You don't even wear boots,"* Gum Baby mocked. "Oh, look, Gum Baby is Tristan. *Gaaaaah.*" She quickly rolled sap on her head until a giant

wobbly ball rested on top of her braids. I guess that was supposed to be my head. She strutted around the table, shouting and throwing a few punches. *“Gaaaaah. Look out, Chestnutt, Tristan is gonna get you. Gaaaaah.”*

Chestnutt laughed so hard, chewed-up carrots came out of her nose, and then we all collapsed. It had been a rough few days, so laughing with friends—no matter how weird or small or irritating they were—felt good. It felt real good.

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye and turned to spy the Amagqirha standing in the shadows. She beckoned me, and I frowned. What had I done now? She gestured again, putting a finger over her lips, and I turned to the group and cleared my throat. “I, uh, gotta go use the bathroom. I’ll be back.”

“Boy, nobody cares,” Gum Baby shouted. “Go do your thing and leave us cool kids alone.” She strutted again. *“Tristan needs to go—”*

“All right!” I yelled, trying to keep a smile off my face. I trotted over to the Amagqirha. She headed up the sloping ramp that curled around Isihlangu’s walls. We climbed in silence, and I watched as the feast carried on below us, with the dancers dancing and the singers singing. It was a beautiful sight, and the fact that people from MidPass and the Ridge were enjoying it together made me feel like they were going to be okay. For now, anyway.

All of a sudden I realized just how high we were climbing. “Um, where are we going?”

The Amagqirha pointed up, to the Atrium above us, and stared at me. “There is something I must show you.”

We finally reached the heavy stone door of the Atrium, which was now closed and flanked by two guards. They slid aside the complicated series of magnetic locks and pushed it open, allowing the diviner to enter. She waved me in behind her.

I contemplated heading back to the feast, but I’m not built to be rude to elders. (Thanks, Mom.) I stepped inside, and the guards closed the door behind me, leaving us alone. I let my eyes adjust.

“Sweet peaches,” I said in a low whisper.

We stood in a perfect cube of polished stone. Black obsidian walls reflected the dim silver glow leaking out of a closed clamshell-like container atop a pedestal. Whatever was inside was the only thing lighting the room, and it gave the Amagqirha’s face a haunted look as she stepped

up to it and whispered a command. The light inside flared as the clamshell popped open.

"You may approach," she said to me. Tufts of gray hair escaped from the braids beneath her beaded wrap, and more wrinkles than I thought humanly possible lined her face.

She grunted a few times, and I realized she was chuckling. "Think I'm too old, boy?"

"No, ma'am," I said right away, trying not to stare.

"Liar."

She stirred her hands in the air above the pedestal, then motioned me closer. "Look."

I climbed three steps, peered down into the container, and my jaw hit the floor. "Is that what I think it is?"

"That depends on what you think it

is." "A Story Box?"

She nodded. "The Story Box of the Ridge people."

A gleaming silver-and-black chest sat on a pillow of black satin. It was a perfect octagon, the eight sides joined at the corners by rippling seams of silver. Patterns etched into the top and sides flared with light every so often, as if it held energy too powerful to be contained.

The Amagqirha went on. "When the sky god bartered away his golden Story Box, it made his tales available for all to consume. But soon the different lands of Alke discovered that some stories are too potent to be exchanged freely by ordinary people. The tales' meanings can be distorted if they are shared without guidance. Anansi realized this when he received his prize from Nyame, so he created the Anansesem, his champion orators, like you, to carry his fables far and wide. The other realms, they had no such champions. So they built Story Boxes in the image of the original one to protect the power of the stories they had collected. But none were like the first. None could hold *all* the stories. Only Nyame's has that power."

She paused, then smiled at me. "Open it," she said.

Didn't have to tell me twice. I reached for it and…she slapped my hand. "Ow!" I shook away the sting. "What was—?" She wagged a finger. "I said, open it."

"That's what I was about to do!" I complained.

The Amagqirha shook her head. "Any boy with grubby fingers can flail about. Only you can open it. You are Anansesem—act like it."

Man, I get scolded no matter what world I'm in. But I took a deep breath and focused. After a moment of searching out the story beats and the rhythm, I felt it—the familiar tingling. The electric melody built up in my fingertips, and when I couldn't hold it in any longer, I let out a whisper.

*"Once, let's say a boy could fly…."*

As the words zipped out of my mouth, the silver Story Box flared so bright my eyes hurt. By the time I could see again, the Amagqirha had rolled up the sleeve on her left arm and was digging around inside the chest, its lid now propped open.

"What are you doing?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"You will see."

She pulled something out of the chest, then grunted with approval and slammed the Story Box closed. I frowned—I hadn't gotten a chance to look inside—but she ignored me and began shaping something in her hands, whispering strange words over them.

"What are—?"

"I said, you will see." She glared at me, then returned to her mysterious activity. After several minutes, she straightened, examined whatever it was she had made, and nodded. "It will do."

She held out her hand. "Your

bracelet." "Huh?"

"Your bracelet with the charms. Hand it

over." "But—"

She narrowed her eyes and my default reaction was to do as I was told. I untied the bracelet and held it out, and she snatched it quick as lightning. The Amagqirha had a nice jab. She hunched over and murmured to herself, and I swear I saw silver symbols etched in the air before they disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Finally, she turned back to me.

"Here."

I took the bracelet and held it up, squinting in the dim light. She had strung it with a tiny silver ball, which nestled between the two adinkras.

"A bead?" What was it with Alkeans and their jewelry?

"A talisman, boy. For protection."

"From what, a loose braid?"

The Amagqirha pursed her lips. "You would be wise to take this seriously. Something is coming. Something you've seen before, and yet

have never seen the like. You know of whom I speak, even if you didn't mention him to the elders."

Uncle C's cackle echoed in my ears, and I shivered. "I do."

"Then you know he brings pain. He brings terror. He brings suffering and destruction. The horror he rides in on, the old evil he's driven up from the Burning Sea, it will deliver death to us all."

The words *death to us all* echoed around the room.

"You will need all the help you can get if you are to defeat them both." I stared down at the bead. "If? Not *when* I defeat them?"

"*If* seems more appropriate."

"And how about Anansi? Will he—?"

The Amagqirha sighed and leaned on the pedestal, and in its glow I could see just how old and tired she really was.

"Closing the tear in the sky, defeating these iron monsters—that is only the beginning." Her eyes seared into mine. "The elders have seen it. I have seen it. If you do not succeed, a terrible war will follow. This talisman will provide aid when you need it."

"Will it transform into a shield or a sword?" I slipped on the bracelet and secured it.

"No, it will help you commune with the—"

"Ouch!" I hopped up and down and shook my arm. Hot, stabbing pain shot through my wrist, and I turned it over to see Anansi's adinkra glowing orange-red. A blister had already begun to form where it had burned my skin.

"What is it?" the Amagqirha asked.

"Anansi's charm," I said, wincing. "It's—" My eyes went wide and I inhaled quickly. Before I could explain, however, a booming sound shook the mountain, sending bits of rock clattering down and the two of us stumbling. The pedestal with the Story Box began to sink into the floor, and a low rumble vibrated through the air.

"What's going on?" I shouted.

The Amagqirha's face had gone pale, and she gripped my wrist and tugged me to the door. "Something has activated the sentinels," she said grimly. "We're being attacked."

# 39
# UNWELCOME VISITORS

**THE RUMBLING CONTINUED AS WE** ran back down the slope. I'd been worried the Amagqirha would lag behind, but I had to sprint to keep up as she scampered ahead, lifting her skirts so they wouldn't drag. We tore around the curves, barely staying upright as tremors shook the mountain.

"What's going on?" I shouted after a quake sent me staggering into the wall.

The Amagqirha hauled me upright. "Isihlangu is fighting back."

A lump of fear grew in my throat. What could have the Ridge's defenses going full throttle? Fetterlings? Even the bosslings wouldn't stand a chance against the giant floating towers that guarded the foothills. They'd be smashed before they even got close.

So what could have broken through a mountain nicknamed the Shield?

Something in me still hoped it was all just a false alarm. I mean, we'd triggered a warning boom when we snuck inside. Maybe some other group of desperate Midfolk had come for the Story Box.

Yeah, right.

We finally arrived back at the central chamber, which was in chaos. People ran left and right, searching for kieries and forebears while trying to avoid overturned tables and chairs. Guards whizzed by overhead as they raced to their posts. Children grabbed younger siblings and fled to the

safety of their homes, where stone doors slammed shut and sealed themselves in bursts of silver light.

"Tristan!"

Ayanna and Thandiwe crouched behind a makeshift barricade of food-splattered tables. Gum Baby stood on top of one, screaming insults at the would-be intruders, while Chestnutt nervously recited iron-monster stats over and over. Nyame's empty Story Box rested next to them, as dull and dingy as ever. I sprinted over to them and dropped to the ground.

"Where have you been, you—?"

The Amagqirha dropped down next to us, and whatever insult Ayanna was going to fling at me dissolved into a grudging tone. "Just…don't scare us like that. One minute we were eating together, and the next you were gone and the mountain started shaking."

"The Amagqirha said it could be some of the rock lasers," I said.

The old lady looked at Thandiwe, who nodded, then chewed her lip. "She's right," said the Ridge warrior. "But it's not just some of them. All the sentinels activated at once. Whatever's out there is big. Real big."

As if her words signaled the next stage in the assault, the giant stone double doors to the chamber shuddered as something crashed against them. People started screaming, and Thandiwe scowled and pulled her kierie and spear free. Ayanna slipped her staff out of its holster—at some point the Ridge guards had returned her weapon/rudder to her.

And me?

Why, I had a fancy bracelet!

The expression on my face must've been a doozy, because Thandiwe chuckled and held out her club to me.

"Here," she said. "Try to be useful."

I started to take it, then thought of something. "No, I'm good."

She frowned as I pulled out the gloves John Henry had given me. When I put them on, the hammer symbol above the knuckles flared bright. I smiled at Thandiwe. "Better stick with what I know best."

She raised an eyebrow, then turned away. I let the smile fade, but the words stuck with me. I *was* good at boxing. The conviction surprised me, but I honestly believed that whatever came next, I could face it with both fists raised.

*BOOM!*

The main entrance doors sagged inward. Something huge moved around outside—I caught glimpses of it in the growing cracks. Large, determined, and angry. A giant three-fingered hand made of rotted wood and rusty metal appeared at the edge of the door. It tore away a chunk of stone, like a three-year-old grabbing a piece of cake, and hurled it inside.

I flinched as the boulder bounced near us with a floor-rattling crash. “What is that out there?!”

“I don’t know,” Thandiwe whispered, her face tight. “Let’s hope the guards can—”

A fist slammed through, widening the hole, and the screech of a thousand chains scraping together stabbed our ears, forcing everyone to hunch over and grab their skulls.

“We should sneak out the way we came in!” Ayanna shouted. She pointed halfway up the mountain wall, toward the tunnel to the tram. “We’re not going to make a difference in this fight. We can get a head start and be back with Nyame before these beasts even know we left. Thandiwe, you can come with us.”

Thandiwe grimaced. She didn’t look fond of the idea of letting her kinfolk fight without her, but she didn’t argue, either. It made all the sense in the world. We could slip away and be that much closer to saving MidPass. That was the whole goal, right? Right?

And yet…

“No,” I said, glancing at the Amagqirha. “We can’t.”

“What do you mean ‘we can’t’?” asked Ayanna. “Tristan, this is our chance.”

Chestnutt piped up. “She’s right. If we don’t get out now, we might be stuck here.”

I shook my head. “No. We can’t just leave them when they’re in trouble. They helped us, and—”

“Maybe you *should* go,” Thandiwe cut in. I looked at her in surprise and she gripped her kierie and spear tight. “The Ridge can hold. It will be tough, but my people can fight them off. Your people need you.” “No!” I shook my head. “We don’t abandon friends.”

Ayanna groaned. “Why do you have to be a hero at the worst possible time?”

More hammering and scraping at the door interrupted the discussion. I swallowed, then turned to the Amagqirha. “You should head somewhere

safe. And take Nyame's empty Story Box—just in case."

She studied me, then nodded. "I will keep it with…what I showed you. It will be safer there." She grabbed the ratty crate and trotted toward the ramp to the Atrium. After a few steps she turned. "There is strength in not fighting, Tristan. Remember that." And then she kept going.

A loud roar blasted outside the hall, and with a final punch, the doors collapsed into piles of rubble. Fetterlings swarmed in.

"Here they come!" I yelled. "Watch out for the big…whatever it is." But it still hadn't made it into the chamber.

"One thing at a time," Thandiwe said.

"Right." I ducked as a fetterling leaped over me, then I smashed it to smithereens with a right cross. "Just let me know when I need to focus on the thing with a hand the size of a car."

A group of fetterlings sprinted across the open floor toward Thandiwe and me as we protected our friends and other people crouched behind the overturned table. I balled my fists and dropped into my stance, but before I could swing again, Thandiwe shouted and smacked three clear across the room with her club. Another tried to snake around the edge of the table, but Ayanna's staff, flaring with golden light, struck out and jabbed it in the collar until it disintegrated into a tinkle of blackened fragments.

A cheer went up as the last fetterling was pinned by a Ridge guard's spear. I didn't join in. This wasn't over—not by a long shot.

"Hey!" Gum Baby shouted. "Is that it? Save some glory for Gum Baby! Y'all being greedy."

As soon as she spoke, a face—if you could call it that—lowered itself to the doorway, and I shivered at the twisted mouth of splintered wooden planks and knotted chains. It roared, and the smell of fishy water made my stomach heave. The good news was that the creature looked too huge to enter the room. How it had gotten into the mountain at all was beyond me. The bad news was that another wave of fetterlings swept through underneath it, followed by a bossling. I groaned. "You had to open your little big mouth."

Gum Baby grinned from ear to drawn-on ear. "You just stay behind Gum Baby and hush. Gum Baby'll keep you safe." She flipped in the air to land on the back of a charging fetterling, pulled its snapping manacle-hands behind its head, and used them as reins. "Wahoo! Gum Baby's on the move!"

“Be careful!” I shouted, and then I had to lurch aside as two fetterlings snapped at my wrists. By the time I had smashed the first one and launched the second into the air with my fists, Gum Baby and her mount were galloping around firing sap balls at anything that moved.

The monstrosity outside the door tried to claw a bigger opening, while inside, the bossling alternated between harassing half a dozen Ridge guards and clearing rubble from the doorway. If the two of them succeeded…

“Princess!” A guard coasted off of a rail to a floating stop a foot or so above the ground, his forebear humming as he balanced on it. “The Shield forces have been summoned. We only need to hold off the enemy for a few more minutes.”

Thandiwe nodded, and the guard flew off to join a squadron that was buzzing around the bossling’s head, hammering blows that didn’t seem to faze the monster.

*“Princess?”* I asked.

“Drop it,” she said. She pulled her forebear off her wrist and switched it from a shield to its normal hover mode. She stepped on, then beckoned me to join her.

“Come,” Thandiwe said.

I took a look at the board. “Nah.”

“Now, Tristan. We have to hold until the Shield forces get here. If that… creature keeps digging, we don’t stand a chance.”

Gum Baby galloped past, still riding her fetterling and whooping and hollering.

I growled, then grabbed Thandiwe’s outstretched hand and climbed aboard. “All right, but you’d better take it”—the board shot forward onto the nearest rail, and I barely had time to catch my balance —“slooooooooooow!”

We climbed high into the air, weaving in and out of stalactites hanging from the rocky ceiling, and I mumbled prayers in seven different languages as we circled the inside of Isihlangu on its glittering spiral rails. The great hall of the fortress swirled with action, and from our vantage point we could see it all. Ridgefolk fled up the circular paths that spiraled around the walls, trying to get inside their homes before fetterlings caught them. Guards rode forebears like professional skateboarders, shifting the Alkean hoverboards from rail to rail so fast Tony Hawk would’ve been jealous. The bossling clambered atop the stone stage in the middle of the room and screeched.

We had to do something, or we'd be overrun. I pointed at the link of chain just below the bossling's manacle-head.

"There!" I shouted. "We have to hit it there—it's a weak spot!"

Thandiwe whistled, and the Ridge guards peeled away from the iron monster and fell into formation behind her, everyone lining up on the same rail. She pointed to me. "Follow his lead. Where he strikes, we strike. Understood?"

"Yes, Princess," they all shouted, and I raised an eyebrow.

"Focus," she growled, handing me her club, "and get ready. We attack… now!"

The forebear dove, and I shouted a war cry. It sounded heroic, but honestly, it was a shriek of terror. Everyone was counting on me, though, so I gripped the kierie in one hand, held on to Thandiwe with the other, and when the bossling reared in front of us, I swung with all my might.

*CLANG!*

My arms shook with the impact. We whizzed by, arcing back up into the air, and the guards followed my attack with their own.

"Again!" I shouted over the whooshing air. "It's still standing."

We dove again and again, preventing the bossling from focusing on the doorway. It screeched and swiped at us. One of its chains clipped a guard, and he fell screaming to the floor. Another swipe sent two more spiraling down, and all of a sudden it was just Thandiwe and me.

But the bossling had suffered, too. It ignored the door completely and wobbled on its coiled chains. Down on the floor, Ayanna and a stunt-riding Gum Baby were holding off a swarm of fetterlings, but more were entering. They surrounded the defenses and hemmed my friends in.

"We need to hurry," Thandiwe shouted. "Ayanna is in trouble!"

"One more attack should do it," I said, determined to end this. "It's reeling. If we can—"

But I never got to finish the sentence.

The doors buckled inward, and the wooden beams of the frame groaned like they were holding too much weight. In an explosion of dust and rock, the largest iron monster I'd ever seen bulled its way through the collapsed doorway, trampling the injured bossling in the process.

# 40
# HULLBEASTS AND BRAND FLIES

**SOME THINGS JUST SHOULDN'T EXIST.**

You get me?

This creature, man…this creature was a collection of rot on four legs. Yes, four legs. Plus two huge arms that scraped the stone floor as it moved into the hall. Its extremities were soggy wooden beams intertwined with metal shackles, the iron restraints lining its limbs like veins. A piece of a thick mast served as a head, with crooked eyes made of rusted iron spars. The torso, a huge warped frame of an old ship, shook and sloshed as it walked and dribbled a wet green trail of algae behind it. It was the size of an elephant and just as intimidating.

And the smell. Holy moly.

Swamps, dead fish, sweat, dirty toilets, and straight-up-and-down funk. It washed over us and I heard more than a few people dry-heaving and vomiting, including some guards on their forebears.

"What *is* that thing?" Thandiwe gasped, holding her nose. "I…I don't know, but we need to regroup," I said. "Yes…yes, I think you're right."

We quickly descended, and before the forebear reached the floor, I hopped off and skidded to a stop next to Ayanna.

The monster lumbered to the middle of the room, flinging guards aside left and right. It kept one hand on its bloated chest, but the other smashed people, pillars, and furniture alike. It slammed the ground twice with one fist, then let out a roar that nearly blew us across the hall.

Gum Baby rode her fetterling up to us, flipped off of it, then pummeled the iron monster with sap. She pointed at the giant creature and said, "Y'all gonna handle that, or do Gum Baby gotta do everything?"

Ayanna ignored her and turned to me. "We still have time. We can slip out of the tram tunnel—the raft is up there."

I hesitated, then shook my head. "No, we can't leave until reinforcements come. The monsters will rip this place apart."

"No, see, I've been thinking. What if they're following us?"

I ripped my eyes away from the monster, which was batting at the Ridge warriors near its head like they were gnats, and looked at Ayanna. "What?"

"The fetterlings, the bosslings, now this thing—what if they're following us?" She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and grabbed my arm. "We'd be helping by leaving! Right?"

"But why would they—?"

"Because we're trying to stop them, because you're an Anansesem, because they hate us, I don't know! But it makes sense."

Thandiwe started to back up. "I think…I think we should—"

"Got it!" Chestnutt broke in. She hopped over on her hind legs and held up a single sheet of paper. "I found a list of monsters in Anansi's notes. I think I know what this is."

We all huddled behind a chipped stone table, most of its jewels shattered or missing, and listened as our bunny spy gave us the lowdown.

"Made of rotted wood and abandoned shackles," she read aloud. "Bound by rotten malevolence—"

"Eleven what?" Gum Baby asked.

"MALEVOLENCE! Evil! Bound by rotten malevolence, and carriers of disease via their…Oh no." Chestnutt looked up and gulped. "Carriers of disease via the brand flies infesting their bodies. Hullbeasts."

Ayanna panicked. "Brand flies? Did you say brand flies? Tristan, we need to get out of here. We need to go right now!"

I licked my lips. "Okay. Okay, let's—"

A deafening croak filled the hall. The monster—the hullbeast—cupped its free three-fingered hand around its wide mouth and croaked again.

Something flew out into the air and hovered above everyone. A buzzing sound filled the room.

Chestnutt hopped into Ayanna's arms and shouted, "Watch out! It's a scout fly! Once it locks on to you, the whole brood—"

The scout fly shot up, then dove like a falcon straight at us. It hovered a few feet away. Two metal antennae waggled at us—no, it waggled at *me*— and started to whine.

And when I say whine, I don't mean like your little cousin when she's complaining you won't let her give you a makeover. I mean like a mosquito buzzing past your ear. But think of a mosquito the size of an eagle. And made of rusty metal.

Getting the picture?

I finally understood why the gods hadn't been able to get near the burning tear. With swarms of these things filling the sky, they'd not only have to worry about getting scorched by the fire, they'd also have to watch their backs for prehistorically large poison bugs.

Wonderful.

The whining sound filled the hall, and Ayanna tugged at my arm. "Now, Tristan! We need to leave *now*!"

We all took off running for the ramp, but then I felt a tingling in my hands, and I stopped to look behind us.

The giant iron monster opened its mouth wide—wider than a mouth should ever, ever open—and it bellowed, allowing a maelstrom of brand flies dripping with green venom to erupt from its mouth.

Not toward me, though. Toward Ayanna.

"No!" I shouted.

Horrendous screams filled the mountain. The metal bugs swarmed like bees at a picnic. Everywhere a brand fly landed, skin sizzled and welted. Victims tried to peel the flies off, but whatever type of poison those flying iron monsters carried, it was potent. After a few feeble attempts to free themselves, the Ridgefolk crumpled to the floor, paralyzed. Fetterlings snapped cuffs around their wrists and ankles and tugged them out the door. The hullbeast scooped up more by the fistful and dropped them into its swollen torso.

I turned in circles, stunned.

Thandiwe and Ayanna were surrounded up on the ramp. I watched them swing and connect, sending bug after bug tumbling to the ground. But there

were dozens—no, hundreds of the insects—so many that soon I couldn't see the two girls anymore.

A brand fly zoomed at my face, but just before it landed, a glob of sap splattered on its wings and it crashed in a tailspin.

Gum Baby had flipped into the air and landed in my hood just in time. "Well? Get a move on, Gum Baby ain't got all day."

I sprinted toward the ramp. A bug whizzed past my cheek, and I ducked and put on a burst of speed. Somebody screamed behind me, and I winced but didn't stop. I cursed myself. Why hadn't I listened to Ayanna before?

A cluster of Ridgefolk tried to barricade themselves inside a storeroom near the winding ramp. They piled tables and chairs and forebears in front of the door before closing it. I thought about trying to squeeze inside with them but then saw a brand fly land, tuck its wings to its back, and wriggle through a tiny crack at the bottom.

The screams inside would follow me forever, it seemed.

I ducked my head and ran up the ramp. Gum Baby flung sap at anything that got too close. Fetterlings were on our tail, and she knocked several backward with well-aimed shots. Brand flies were sniped out of midair, each hit punctuated with an insult.

*Ping*

"You ain't nothing!"

*Ping*

"Tell 'em Gum Baby sent you!"

*Ping*

"Ow!"

"Well, move your big head, Bumbletongue, Gum Baby trying to save your raggedy butt."

I rubbed the back of my head and kept running. We'd just rounded the final curve, heading toward the thinning cloud of brand flies near the tram entrance, when a scream split the air.

My blood chilled. "Ayanna."

Several flies dive-bombed us as we got closer, and I swung my loaner kierie like a two-handed sword, batting them back. More peeled away from the cloud around my friends, buzzing and rattling and keeping me away. The floor began to tremble beneath my feet, and I felt my knees go weak as a fresh horde of fetterlings charged through the destroyed main entrance. Some split off and snapped up fallen Ridgefolk—no doubt hauling them

back to the Maafa and Uncle C. The rest stampeded up the ramp after me and Gum Baby.

Enemies in front.

Enemies behind.

Enemies—

A three-fingered hand the size of a minivan crashed down on the ramp between us and where Thandiwe was huddled over Ayanna, swatting metal bugs left and right. I couldn't see Chestnutt anywhere. The hullbeast's ugly face peeked over the ledge, growling and smelling like a kindergarten bathroom.

Gum Baby tugged my earlobe. "Bumbletongue, Gum Baby sure hope you got a plan. 'Cause, uh…it ain't looking good."

Hearing the normally brash pint-size peashooter so worried made me realize just how much trouble we were in.

As if the humongous iron monster hadn't made that clear.

Fetterlings screeched and thundered up the ramp. Brand flies dipped and swooped, buzzing overhead. Thandiwe met my eyes as I dropped into a crouch with her kierie, preparing to make our last stand. I'm sure my face looked as hopeless as hers did. There were just too many of them, and not enough of us. The reinforcements had never arrived. The Ridgefolk had been either sedated, hauled away, or barricaded behind stone doors. We were on our own.

Drumbeats sounded, faint and distant, like someone was playing somewhere out on Isihlangu. Maybe it was a distress call. The hullbeast raised his arm and easily swatted aside hundreds of brand flies. Two more swings and the air cleared. Thandiwe lay on the ground, covering Ayanna, shielding her from the flies. Miraculously, though dozens and dozens of dented metal bugs lay scattered around the entrance to the trams, the princess's skin was clear. But Ayanna's…

"No!" I shouted.

As the fetterlings turned the final curve, I sprinted toward my injured friend. But the hullbeast was faster. Its massive arm stretched toward the prone figures, and I felt my heart drop.

I wasn't going to make it.

# 41
# THE MAGIC AX

**THE DRUMBEAT GREW LOUDER, AND** the sound of flapping wings floated past my ear on a faint breeze. As the hullbeast reached for my friends, as fetterlings stormed after me and brand flies circled the silver gem lights like vultures, the drums pounded harder and harder, and I stopped running.

A crow cawed and thunder clapped, and everyone in Isihlangu froze in time.

"Seems like you in a spot of trouble, sure it does."

High John stepped out of the fold of Old Familiar's wings, his footsteps sending little twisters of dust spinning down the ramp. In one hand he held an ax with a head that glowed like an angry red coal. I swear I saw a face on it winking at me.

"You came back," I half accused, half sobbed.

"Thought I wouldn't?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I pointed to where Ayanna and Thandiwe lay just past the motionless arm of the hullbeast. "Please, you've got to help them! Ayanna's been branded, and maybe Thandiwe, too, and I can't tell if they're moving, and the hullbeast is gonna swallow them and drag them away if we don't—"

“Okay, okay,” High John said. “We’re gonna do this together. All right?”

I took a breath, then another, and nodded. High John grinned, clapped me on the shoulder, then backed up and turned to face the hullbeast. He eyed it, then patted the head of his ax.

“Okay, love, seems we need to go to work again.” High John took a few steps back down the ramp to where the charging fetterlings were suspended in time. He motioned for me to follow. “You come help me with these fancy contraptions, let Old Familiar take care of those poison flies, and my ax will handle that giant over there, sure it will.”

“Your ax will…?”

My voice trailed off as High John tossed the ax in the air AND IT STAYED THERE.

I licked my lips. *“She gifted John a magic ax,”* I recited.

“Hey now, I know that story.”

“I can’t believe it’s true!” One of the many stories Nana used to tell us about High John was how he fell in love with the devil’s daughter. In order to win her hand, the devil told him he had to clear an enormous field, plant corn, then harvest it, all in one day. The devil’s daughter, in love with the man, gave High John a magic ax and plow to complete the task.

“Where’s the plow?” I asked.

High John raised an eyebrow. “You want me to plant some iron monsters?”

“No, I guess that wouldn’t make sense.”

“I reckon it wouldn’t. Now, you got any more questions, or can we mosey on about our business?”

I raised my fists and nodded. He snorted, then tilted his head at Old Familiar. The giant crow cawed once and flapped its enormous wings. The air in the great hall shimmered and rippled, like a pond when you skip stones across it, and the world came back to life.

The next few minutes were a blur.

I punched left and right, nonstop, knocking fetterlings off the ramp or smashing them into the wall. High John danced between the iron monsters, tangling them up as they lunged at him and leaving them twisted in rusty knots, juicy targets for my hooks and uppercuts. The ramp was just wide enough for High John and me to defend. Nothing got past us.

*Chop chop chop*

High John's ax went to work on the hullbeast. I caught a glimpse once when I spun away from an attack. It wasn't pretty. You ever see a twig get caught beneath a lawn mower? Or tree branches fed into a wood-chipper? Yeah.

*Chop chop chop*

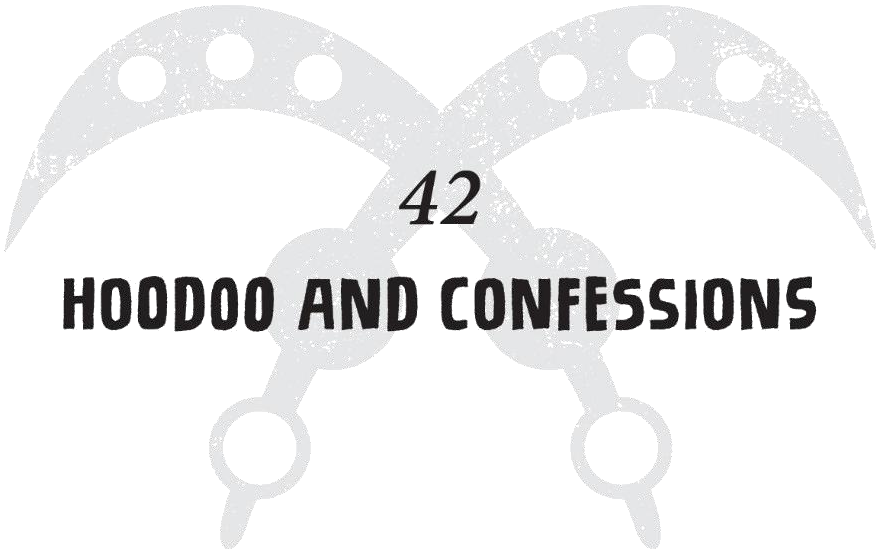
Meanwhile, Old Familiar cawed and hunted brand flies. Though the bugs swarmed around him, the poison didn't seem to have any effect on the shadow bird—his black feathers just absorbed it like ink into the page. Then, with a clack of his beak, the flies were gone. I even managed to punch a few knotted-up fetterlings into the air and watched as Old Familiar snapped them up, too.

"Last one," High John called, kicking a wriggling and screeching tangle of fetterlings down the ramp toward me. I sized them up, gripped both hands together like a club, and grinned.

"Fore!" I shouted, then belted the iron monsters clear off the ramp. "Nice!"

I grinned, but the smile fell off my face when I heard a moan of pain. High John and I sprinted up the ramp, kicking aside battered and deformed brand flies, and slid to a stop next to Thandiwe. Chestnutt lay on Ayanna's chest, listening. The tiny bunny lifted her head slowly, like it weighed twice as much as usual, and her eyes glistened.

"She's not breathing," she whispered, and my blood froze.



# 42
# HOODOO AND CONFESSIONS

**“CAN YOU HELP HER?” I** asked. My voice cracked and I didn’t even care.

High John looked worried as he pulled the root bag from around his neck and laid it above Ayanna’s heart. “This poison, it ain’t something of the body.”

“What?”

He pointed at the brands that marred her brown skin—dark and angry blue-purple welts. “No fever, no twitchin’—just these marks, looking like they’ve always been there. She’s still alive, but…” He shook his head. “This is beyond my conjure, I’m thinking. I’ll try, though. Just not here. I need Old Familiar for this. Let’s go.” He gathered Ayanna in his arms, then stepped off the edge of the ramp.

Thandiwe gasped, then gasped again when Old Familiar rose into the air with High John on his back. I immediately jumped on too, with Gum Baby in my hood.

Thandiwe took a deep breath. “You need my help,” she said, more to herself than to me. “This fight is not over.” She strapped her forebear to her arm, picked up Chestnutt, and joined us.

I managed a smile—leaving home was not an easy choice to make—but my eyes never left Ayanna.

Thandiwe settled behind me and asked me a question.

“What?” I hadn’t heard her. My attention was on High John as he laid Ayanna down on the broadest part of the giant crow’s back and secured her with rope.

“I thought you didn’t like flying,” Thandiwe murmured, eyeing Old Familiar cautiously.

“I don’t” was all I said.

“Y’all best hang on,” High John called back, and then the crow gave two powerful flaps and rose in the air.

“Tristan! Wait!”

The Amagqirha waved from the floor below. She climbed onto the stage with Nyame’s Story Box in her arms. Old Familiar spiraled down, and I reached for the now irrelevant piece of junk when we got close enough.

But instead of giving it to me, she put it down and grabbed my wrist. “May your ancestors guide you. And remember—all of Alke is with you.” Her eyes flashed silver, like the twists in her hair and the beads around her wrists and ankles. The Amagqirha stepped back as Old Familiar lifted into the air again, the crate in its talons, and flew out of the main entrance. I looked over my shoulder to see the diviner holding up a hand in farewell as she, the Ridgefolk, and the mountain they lived inside dwindled in the distance.

Thandiwe, sitting near the giant shadow crow’s tail feathers, cradled Chestnutt, who seemed to be asleep. Gum Baby sat in Thandiwe’s lap beside the little rabbit and spoke to me without looking up.

“Chestnutt’s gonna be all right, right?”

Oh no. “Is she…?” I asked Thandiwe.

“Looks like she was stung, too,” said the princess.

“Stupid bunny,” said the doll. “Gum Baby should’ve been there, should’ve been protecting her. Bunny can’t fight, she knows she can’t fight. Why’d she think—?” She broke off, crossing her arms and shaking her head.

I didn’t say anything as I kneeled by Ayanna’s feet and held on to the rope tied around her ankles. Tears welled in my eyes. Uncle C was living up to his promise of taking everything from me.

We shot out of the mountain like a bottle rocket aimed at the stars. Outside, the sky glowed around the edges, moving from a rosy pink above Isihlangu to an angry red smear on the western horizon. The tear in the sky had spread like a crack in a windshield and was boiling the lands below

with its glare. *Hurry up, then, and put us out of our misery,* I said silently to the haint.

When Old Familiar straightened out, I heard Thandiwe say behind me, “Ancestors, help us.”

The mountainside below the Shield lay in ruins. Every sentinel tower was shattered. Glittering black fragments dotted the land, winking at us as we soared overhead. Deep gouges ran for yards, as if the iron monsters had taken out their wrath on the earth itself.

Thandiwe hissed in pain. I was about to go console her when High John called me from the front of the bird.

“Tristan, come here, would you?” His voice sounded calm. Like, too calm.

I stood up and took another glance around. Thandiwe, mourning her home. Gum Baby, hurting for her friend. Chestnutt and Ayanna clinging to life. Everybody fighting to hold on to something precious, at risk of losing it forever.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, carefully shuffling past Ayanna and over to High John.

“Two things.” He cleared his throat, then spoke in a lowered voice. “Ayanna’s fading fast. Nothing I’m doing is helping, boy, it sure ain’t. I’m trying, but I reckon I don’t got the conjure for it.”

*Fading fast.* His words punched me in my throat, and I couldn’t speak.

High John looked out over the foothills. “She ain’t gonna make it to MidPass, Tristan. Not like this. But…”

Something in his voice pulled my eyes toward his.

“But there may be someone—someones—in that shiny Alkean city yonder.”

I followed his finger as he pointed to the north and west. “You mean the Golden Crescent?”

“That’s the one. I know some folk who got stronger conjure than I do. Might be they can save our pilot if we can get her there in time.”

I chewed my lip. “We were going to see Nyame anyway.” I explained our plan to ask the sky god to repair the Story Box. Then I studied him. “You said ‘two things.’ What’s the second?”

He crouched by Ayanna and pointed to the conjure bag he’d laid on her chest. “Like I said, this ain’t doing much. It’s supposed to keep her spirit

close to her body, help her fight off whatever poison those metal creatures put in her soul. But she needs more—she needs your help."

"What can I do?"

He patted a spot next to Ayanna. "Sit awhile. Talk to her. You've got the spider god's gift, boy. Might be you can reach her where the conjure bag can't."

"You want me to tell her a story? What kind?"

"Just talk to her. What about don't matter much to me. Speak to her soul, distract her from the pain."

*Speak to her soul. Right.*

But I sat down and nodded. "I'll do my best."

He clapped my shoulder and moved up front to guide Old Familiar. I sat there, crisscross applesauce on the spine of a giant crow, staring at the unconscious form of the girl who'd had my back from the start. No questions asked—well, lots of questions, but never about whether she should help me.

What to say?

What would…? What would…? I gritted my teeth, forcing the name of my best friend back into my head. Eddie. What would Eddie say if he were here?

Eddie would…

He'd…

A slow smile crossed my face. Eddie would introduce himself.

Alke rolled by beneath us as I gathered my words. Isihlangu's misty peaks occasionally popped into view, like EKGs by a hospital bedside. The wind pushed and pulled at Ayanna's twists. I tucked a loose one behind her ear, then cleared my throat.

"Hey. It's…it's me." I took a deep breath. I couldn't lose another friend. I just couldn't. "High John said you…you're still there, that I should talk to you, like you can hear me. Because you *can* hear me. So…I guess I'm gonna talk."

Old Familiar rose and fell with each powerful beat of its wings. The up-and-down motion reminded me of a ship fighting against the current. It should have made me feel nauseated and tense like it normally does, but my fear for Ayanna outweighed my fear of heights.

“You asked me why…back there…why I always look for a chance to be a hero. Well”—I inhaled, sucking in as much air as I could, then let it out in a rush—“the truth is, the one time I *should’ve* saved someone, I panicked. I…messed up and they…they died. And it haunts me. That failure haunts me every night.”

Uncle C thought he was smart. The haint had left me with the one memory I hated most. The memory of Eddie’s death. Well, all memories serve a purpose…. What are memories except stories we tell ourselves, right?

“We were coming home from a field trip to the museum,” I went on. “In Chicago, middle of winter, so the roads were a bit icy. We were so close to making it back to the school—I think we were only a few blocks away— when we drove over a bridge and hit a patch of ice. The bus…the bus spun around one hundred eighty degrees and we slid into the other lane, right into the path of a truck.”

I sensed someone moving next to me on Old Familiar, but right then I could only see snow flurries trickling through a shattered window and flashing red lights against a gray sky.

“The impact smashed the rear of the bus, where we were sitting. We always sat in the back so we could talk our nerdy talk without anyone looking at us weird. The emergency exit door was knocked off, and the floor was cracked, and exhaust was pouring in, making it hard to breathe. But I could see…I saw that the bus was hanging over the edge of the bridge….

“All the kids were screaming, and I kept hearing adults shout, ‘Hold on, we’re getting help, just hold on.’

“Eddie was in the back corner, trapped between two seats, struggling and failing to free himself. He asked me to save him. ‘Tristan, pull me out. Tristan. Tristan.’ I still hear his voice. I still see his hand reaching for me. I didn’t move. I was so scared. I was scared of falling, of drowning in the water below. I didn’t wanna die. I didn’t wanna die, and that’s all I could think about, that I didn’t wanna die. And Eddie called me, and I didn’t wanna die.”

Tears were rolling down my face now, and I took a deep, shuddering breath. I finally looked up.

Everyone crouched nearby. Thandiwe with Gum Baby on her shoulder, and High John holding an unconscious Chestnutt.

“Some hero, right?” I said.

“Tristan, it wasn’t—” he began, but I cut him off.

“Don’t give me that mess. Don’t even. Y’all grown folks quick to say something like that. ‘Oh, it wasn’t your fault.’ Don’t lie to me, High John. Give me that much, at least.”

Silence followed the rant, and I focused on my breathing. In and out. In and out.

High John sat down and set Chestnutt in his lap. A tiny bag hung around her neck—more of his conjure medicine. He sighed, then turned to me. “Fine. I reckon I can at least be honest, sure I can. Could you have saved your friend? Maybe. But that maybe ain’t gonna change anything. Can’t live your life with grief whispering in your ear, pulling you this way and that. But you can’t shove it in a drawer deep inside yourself, neither. Naw, you got to sit grief down and talk to it. Listen to it. Come to terms with it. Pain is the body’s way of saying it’s healing, so you gotta let it heal.”

I shrugged. “That’s what Mr. Richardson says. ‘Give it time, let it work itself out naturally.’ But how much time does it need?” I caught a glossy black feather that fluttered loose from Old Familiar’s back. “Eddie was my best friend, and I miss him, and walking around with this hurt…well, it hurts.”

Thandiwe spoke up. “The elders have a saying. *Too much is the same as not enough.*”

“What does that mean?”

Gum Baby flicked sap at me. “It means be sad, but not too sad.” “Okay, but—”

“Gum Baby ain’t got time to lead you everywhere, Bumbletongue. This is one of life’s great mysteries. A puzzle. Shoot, it might even be one of those hedgehog things. What are they called? Echidnas, that’s right.”

I stared at her. “You mean an *enigma*?”

“Why you always correcting somebody?”

“The point is,” High John interrupted with a ghost of a grin, “you should grieve your friend. But remember to live your life as it is now, and not how it would have been. Never forget, but accept. Understand?”

I nodded. I thought I did.

“Hey,” Thandiwe called. She pointed over the left wing, where a glimmering sliver of golden-orange land appeared. “We’re here.”

# 43
# THE MMOATIA FOREST

**SOMETHING WAS OFF.**

The burning tear in the sky covered the Golden Crescent in an orange glow. Ghostly flames danced on the beautiful palaces beneath Old Familiar's wings, somehow throwing off real heat. Nyame's land had turned into a giant sauna, and sweat beaded on my forehead.

But it wasn't just that.

There was a…feeling in the air like something was lurking, watching and following us as we arrived. That familiar feeling from the Drowned Forest, and from my dreams.

They were here.

Uncle C and the Maafa.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. High John clutched his conjure bag and frowned, Thandiwe held her kierie at the ready, and Gum Baby…well, Gum Baby was herself.

"This ain't how Gum Baby left the place! You see? This is why Gum Baby can't have nice things. Company comes over and RUINS EVERYTHING!"

We soared over the empty city. Ivory towers, now beet red as they reflected the burning rip in the sky, stood tall and angry. The crystal-blue

pools boiled and steamed, and a thick mist curled down the wide avenues and marble-lined streets.

The giant crow landed near a familiar forest with the golden fence and gate running around it. Gum Baby's eyes grew big and she shuffled closer to me.

"Say," she mumbled, "ain't this the place with those creepy whistles and where you ran away like a—?"

"High John," I said hurriedly, "how will this help Ayanna? The city is empty—so I heard."

High John slipped off Old Familiar's back. His face tightened, like he was about to do something adults found uncomfortable, like plunge a toilet, or apologize to a kid. He straightened his vest, smoothed the front of his pants, then cleared his throat.

"Can you bring Ayanna? Might be I need to have my hands free."

He frowned at the arching gate, then snorted at the crumbled gilded leaves in a pile off to the side.

Gum Baby asked him nervously, "You, uh, you know this place?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "I studied under…them, for many years. Before… Well, before."

I squatted and gently lifted Ayanna.

"Tristan?"

The whisper was so faint I almost missed it. But when Ayanna's head shifted, and I looked down to see her eyes open, crinkled with confusion, I stopped moving.

"Right here. I'm right here. We're getting help—you're gonna be on your feet yelling at me in no time. Just hold on."

"Tristan," she murmured again, and then her eyes fluttered shut. "Ayanna?"

As soon as I stepped off Old Familiar with her in my arms, the giant crow cawed and took off, disappearing into the shadows.

My voice carried down the street as I told the others, "She woke up. She spoke, but now…"

High John's face grew worried. "Come on, we need to hurry."

The marble street echoed with our footsteps, and the mist curling around our waists was the only other thing moving as we made our way to the gate. High John raised an eyebrow at the statue with the gummy gag still over her mouth, and Gum Baby and I looked at each other. There's a time for

honesty and a time to focus on the important issues possibly threatening everyone in Alke.

We crossed the threshold, and just like before, the whistling began. Thandiwe kept glancing over her shoulders as she walked, and Gum Baby hid in my hood.

"Look who's the scaredy-cat now," I said.

"Take one for the team," she whispered in my ear. "Gum Baby's too pretty to get in trouble."

High John led us to the foot of the large sycamore tree, and once again I stood in awe of its massive size. It reminded me of the Tree of Power back in MidPass, with its gnarly roots and roof-like branches. We stopped in a hollow among the roots, and High John surprised me. He got down on his knees, placed his hands on his thighs, and began to whistle.

"What is he doing?" Thandiwe whispered. "He's going to get us caught!"

The branches in the tree began to rustle, and leaves floated down around us, as though someone—or a bunch of someones—was climbing down. The mysterious whistles intensified, and High John paused, then began to whistle again.

"I think," I said, realization dawning, "that's the point. Listen. They're talking to each other. Well, signaling each other."

"Who's *they*?"

A small shadow stepped from behind the trunk, and in the fiery glow of the sky, I saw a tiny, fairylike creature. Suddenly a lot of things fell into place.

High John's mentors in conjure and rootwork.

A forest palace.

The whistling stopped, and High John said to us, "I reckon this might be a mite strange, but this is—"

"A mmoatia," I interrupted. "I mean an aboatia—one of the Mmoatia."

High John paused. "Yes. How—? No, let me guess. That nana of yours."

Thandiwe looked back and forth, confused. "What is an aboatia?" "A forest fairy," I answered. The aboatia had a long nose and brown skin that rippled like a forest stream. Its thick braids touched the ground, and its sharp eyes followed me as I took a deep breath and gingerly stepped forward. I kneeled in front of it, still cradling Ayanna, and looked at High

John. “Nana told me that Mmoatia are the keepers of healing. Illnesses and ailments are their domain—and they will teach cures to those they deem worthy.”

I remembered more, but I didn’t think it would be a good idea to say it out loud. Nyame had tasked Anansi with capturing one of the Mmoatia to satisfy his price for the Story Box. To catch the fairy, Anansi had used Gum Baby. (This was back when she was silent, believe it or not.) The aboatia became stuck to the little doll and—*whoosh*—Anansi took them both off to the sky god.

No wonder Gum Baby was hiding now.

High John nodded. “They’ve agreed to help. But…only Ayanna. No one else may stay. Seems they’ve had a recent problem with unwelcome intruders.”

His eyes flashed at me and suddenly my sneakers looked incredibly fascinating. But Gum Baby rustled in my hood.

“What about Chestnutt?” she stage-whispered. “She’s hurt, too!”

High John whistled with the fairy for a few minutes, then nodded. “She can stay as well. But now we must go. The others are getting agitated, and you don’t want to anger the Mmoatia.”

“You can say that again,” Gum Baby muttered.

“What?” asked High John.

“Nothing!” I answered quickly. I laid Ayanna on a flat stretch of ground, thick with grass. Goose bumps rose on her arms in the midnight breeze, and, after a brief moment of hesitation, I took off my hoodie (“Hey!” Gum Baby cried as she tumbled out) and draped it over her.

“I’m coming back,” I whispered to Ayanna. “So don’t you dare go anywhere.”

I wanted to ask the aboatia questions, get High John to translate…. Was Ayanna going to be okay? Could they help her? She was unconscious again, and it was ripping me apart inside.

First Eddie, then his memories, and now Ayanna? It all was too much.

More shadows danced beneath the tree, and the whistling picked up again. Gum Baby danced in place nervously. A hand rested on my shoulder, and High John stood up.

“It’s time, Tristan,” he said. “Gotta get that box to Nyame.”

“Yeah, let’s go already!” hissed Gum Baby, tugging my arm.

I nodded and got to my feet. The aboatia cocked its head at the charms dangling from my wrist, visible now that my hoodie's sleeves weren't hiding them. It whistled, and High John nodded and whistled back. Then he turned to me.

"Hold out your arm," he commanded.

"Why?" I asked, even as I did so. The fairy came closer, and I tried not to stare as it hopped this way and that, peering at the charms. It whistled, and High John rubbed his chin. The fairy bowed, and he bowed in response.

"Come on, kids," he said, heading for the gate.

"What was that about?" Thandiwe asked as she and I followed. Gum Baby stood on my shoulder, one sticky hand on my head for balance.

"Turns out," High John answered, "that despite Anansi's ultimate insult, the bearers of his mark are welcome beneath the branches of the Mmoatia." He met my eyes and grinned. "Seems they have taken a shine to you, boy. You should find your way back here at some point to see why. Favors from the fairies are a powerful thing, sure they are."

I definitely planned to come back—for Ayanna and Chestnutt. Gum Baby patted my head and whispered, "Don't expect Gum Baby to go with you. Nuh-uh."

We stopped outside the gates and retrieved the Story Box from where Old Familiar had left it. High John glared at the burning tear flickering in the sky.

"Time's getting thin. The rip has nearly reached the mainland. We've got to hurry."

"Nyame's palace is this way," I said. I pointed at the trail markers Chestnutt had left during our last visit here, feeling an aching tug. At least she and Ayanna were in good hands now. "Let's go get this Story Box fixed."

# 44

# WE'RE ALL BROKEN—STORY BOX, TOO

**THERE'S A POINT WHEN I** get so worked up I can't tell my emotions apart. Am I angry or sad or scared? Is it everything at once, or none of the above? Mr. Richardson said that when I feel that way, I should grab one emotion like a rope and pull myself back to the moment it first hit me. Retrace my footsteps. Do some mental detective work.

While we followed the silent street to Nyame's shimmering gateway, I followed my tangled and raw feelings back to their beginnings. There was anger at Eddie for leaving me. Stress over Ayanna and Chestnutt being injured. Fear of things getting even worse and my not being able to get back home. Frustration with everybody telling me *Man up*, or *It'll be fine*, or *Go punch something, because it'll make you feel better*.

By the time we arrived at the large plaza and stopped in front of the towering gateway, my hands were shaking and my heartbeat was pounding in my ears.

"You okay?" Thandiwe asked.

I wasn't sure what would come out of my mouth, so I just nodded. High John looked around uneasily. "Something don't feel right." "What? Gum Baby don't see anything."

"Naw, it's…in the air." He glanced at me. "Do you feel it, too? The rhythm, the wind—it's all wrong. That hole in the sky is turning this world

inside out."

Ah yes, one more emotion I'd forgotten about.

Guilt.

High John was right. The electric rhythm, the drumbeat, the words from the land that I'd gotten used to hearing in the background—they'd all disappeared, leaving just a buzzing hum, like speakers cranked all the way up with no music playing. Like lightning about to strike.

"There's a storm coming," I said, keeping my voice low. "I can feel it. We need to hurry."

"Yeah." High John looked around one more time, then checked the sky. "Yeah, sure you right."

We ran through the gate and down the path to the sky god's palace. I felt the statues' golden eyes on me again, but this time their gaze was more appraising than threatening. The Story Box felt heavier as I lugged it past them, and when we reached the final statue, the old queen who'd saved us from the bosslings, I swear I saw her wink.

"Did she just—?" Gum Baby whispered from my shoulder, and I nodded.

"I think so."

The burning sky crackled overhead as we slammed through the giant palace door and skidded to a stop in Nyame's hall. Leopard paused in mid– paw-lick, Python raised his massive head from the stone floor, and the sky god sat moodily on the throne.

"Well," Nyame said, his eyes flashing almost as bright as the tear in the sky. "The non-hero returns. The ungrateful, the selfish, the spurner of gifts. Come to complain some more?"

His eyes moved to Gum Baby and softened, then to Thandiwe and High John, where they lingered. "And you've changed your team. Interesting. Is this a downgrade or an upgrade, young Tristan?"

High John had both hands in his pockets, but I could see the anger in his jaw when he spoke through tight lips. "Your sky god seems upset," he said. "All this gold and nobody to impress."

Nyame got off his throne and stalked down the dais stairs. "Mind your tongue, vagabond. You are here because I allow it."

"Sit back down and count your money, Pops," High John said with a sneer. "You ain't scaring nobody in here."

Leopard growled, a rumble like thunder in a forest, and the massive beast prowled over. High John grinned, a wide, easy smile that I was starting to suspect meant the opposite of good times ahead.

"Tell your kitty to play nice before I send it outside to chase its tail." The grin disappeared and High John's shadow started to stretch and grow. "After I remove it."

Nyame's eyes began to glow, and I sighed and stepped between the two. Honestly, adults are the worst. Do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do hypocrites. Eddie and my memories were out there somewhere, and these two were having a spitting contest.

"I see you're feeling better than the last time we were here," I said, dropping the Story Box in front of the sky god. Nyame paused, scowling at the interruption, then froze.

"Is that—?" he asked, reaching out a trembling arm, and I nodded. He traced a finger over the splintered and warped lid, then let his hand fall. The symbols etched on its sides sparkled briefly, as if they remembered their former glory, before they faded back to worn shadows.

"It's been emptied," he whispered.

"Anansi did it," I said.

The sky god looked up, his eyes brimming with the sorrows of a thousand lost happy endings.

I held up my adinkra bracelet. "It's the only thing that makes sense. We found his notes and the iron monsters he'd been researching. The Story Box —he used it to attract them, like bait. But something went wrong. There was a mishap, a fight…. I think he accidentally drained it of its stories."

Nyame picked up the Story Box and hugged it to his chest. "Anansi…" he repeated, staring blankly at a waterfall across the room.

He summoned the pedestal from under the floor and placed the Story Box gently on top. Then he leaned on the stand, suddenly seeming old and weary.

"But where are the stories now?" Thandiwe asked. "And why did the Weaver go into hiding?" She looked between me and Nyame. "When Anansi gave us the Box, you hadn't even punched the sky open yet. The iron monsters were still scattered and weak."

I winced at the reminder that most of this was my fault. "I don't know, but I plan on asking when I see him."

"So you still intend to go through with this?" Nyame asked.

“We have to. When I smashed the Bottle Tree and created this mess, something fell into this world along with Gum Baby and me—a haint. I know what he wants now. He wants the Story Box so he can get stronger.”

High John thumbed his belt buckle and frowned. “You keep on saying *he*, not *it*. This supervillain of yours got a name?”

“When I saw him, he told me to call him Uncle C.”

Nyame narrowed his eyes. “*Uncle.* UNCLE? You are related to the creature persecuting my people?” The suspicion in his tone made me flinch, but I stood up straight and shook my head.

“No, of course not! It’s his idea of a sick, twisted joke! And he’s coming for us. For me. And he’s bringing the Maafa with him.”

Nyame stood up straight. “Here?”

“Take a good look at the sky, Sky God,” High John sneered.

The edges of Nyame’s fists began to glow white-hot, and before things got any worse, I had to step in again.

“Enough! Iron monsters are coming back here, and they’re just the first wave. According to the Ridge’s Amagqirha, there could be a big war.” I looked at Thandiwe. “She told me the elders felt it as well.”

Thandiwe looked troubled. “So what do we do?”

I kept my eyes on Nyame. “We need you to restore the Story Box. Then we can lure Anansi and convince him to close the hole in the sky. That will weaken the iron monsters enough for us to be able to destroy them.”

“And this Uncle C?” Nyame asked.

High John stepped up to my side. “We’ll deal with him, the boy and I. Together.”

I smiled sadly at him. “It will take more than just you, me, and Old Familiar. Or even John Henry and Miss Sarah and Miss Rose.”

He stiffened. “I’m not going to fight with—”

“There’s no other way,” I interrupted softly. I turned to Nyame. “We’re going to have to work together. Midfolk and Alkeans.”

Nyame and High John eyed each other, and the sky god snorted. It was a very human thing, now that I think about it. Like two boxers who had just finished a match that ended in a draw, both knowing they’d fought a classic bout.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” High John muttered, and I rolled my eyes.

“So, can you fix the Story Box?” Thandiwe asked Nyame.

He pursed his lips, then shrugged. “I can, though I can’t see what good it will do. Anansi’s trickery may prove to be the end of us all.”

“It be your own people,” muttered Gum Baby.

Of all the sticky things that had come out of that doll’s mouth, that may have been the stickiest.

Nyame sighed and planted himself in front of the dais. He grabbed the lip of the pedestal, spoke a few words under his breath, and it lifted and began to spin slowly with the Story Box on top. He muttered more incantations as he reached into thin air and pulled out things I’m not sure I can describe, though I’ll try.

He filled the cracks in the wood with a father’s pride and a mother’s belief. He wove dying rays of sunlight and a breath of fresh air together into ribbons of ivory, which he sent over to wind around the sides of the Box, and then he pulled them tight to straighten the warped planks. The glimmer of a river was molded into place on the lid, and he added the flash of a gem to the latch. I heard laughter as he reinforced the corners with glee. Finally, he outlined the top and sides of the box with gold filigree and stepped back.

Nyame blew gently on the Story Box, and, like an artist removing shavings from a sculpture, revealed his gleaming masterpiece.

“Holy—” High John breathed.

“Sweet peaches,” I said.

Gum Baby clapped.

The gold-and-ivory box was almost too pretty to look at, and the longer I stared at it, the more I was drawn to it. Deep inside me, I heard the power Nyame had called upon, and I—

High John grabbed my wrist. “Easy there.”

I frowned. “What—?” I began, then stopped. I’d started walking forward without realizing it and was inches away from plucking the Story Box off the pedestal.

I swallowed and took three giant steps back. “No wonder everyone wants it.”

Nyame looked proud. “I do good work.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gum Baby said, crossing her arms. “Gum Baby will give you a sticker. Now where’s Anansi? Gum Baby got some questions that need answering, quick, fast, and in a hurry.”

Nyame eyed her for a second, then shook his head and headed for the door to the rooftop gardens. The floating pedestal with the Story Box on top

trailed him, still spinning. Gum Baby made a face at the sky god's back, and we all followed.

In the gardens upstairs, Nyame settled the pedestal near the front edge of the palace roof, overlooking the marina and the bay. The sky god studied its placement for several seconds and made some small adjustments. Thandiwe looked at me and I shrugged impatiently. I wanted this to be over with. I wanted Chestnutt back with us. I wanted to check on Ayanna, to see if she had been healed.

The world may have been in trouble, but friends are friends, and I wanted them close by.

"Tristan," Nyame called. He pointed to the Story Box. "It's time. Open it."

I nodded, then wiped my palms on my shorts. This was it. The moment we'd fought, struggled, cried, and worked so hard for. Gum Baby patted my head, and Thandiwe saluted me with her fist. High John grinned and winked. I took a deep breath, then stepped in front of the pedestal.

"Find the thread," Nyame said before he stepped back.

The thread.

The common story we all share, that passes from city to city, from country to country, from world to world. The story that everyone's uncle wants to tell again and again. The story told at the watercooler. The story told around the campfire. The story told at bedtime, whether in Chicago or Alabama, the Golden Crescent or MidPass.

I closed my eyes.

Music.

Drumbeats.

Clapping.

Laughter.

Calls.

Responses.

And there, beneath it all, hanging by a silver strand of childlike anticipation, I saw it.

*"Let's say there was a land where the People once lived. A land of story, of dreams, of heroes and of gods. A land born of pain and joy, for all stories contain both. Let's say this land was called…Alke."*

The rhythm gathered beneath my skin, and my palms itched with the need to create, to shape. I grabbed the thread with both hands and opened

my eyes. The Story Box burned with light so bright it seared my vision and left behind floating dots of color. It shone like a beacon, a lighthouse of hope and joy.

Thandiwe gasped.

The pedestal beneath the Story Box turned into a pillar of light, and symbols blazed to life within it. In trails of copper ink guided by an invisible hand, the symbols were applied to the magnificent chest in honor of the gods of the Golden Crescent. Their adinkras blurred from reddish-gold to dazzling white as beneath them scenes from another time were depicted:

People danced in a circle around a glowing golden box, as a man with golden eyes watched over them.

A spider wove a web of silk that turned into words, and men and women wearing the spiderweb adinkra collected the words and marched off.

A group of people, including a spider and a being with glowing eyes, confronted a terrifying creature rising out of the sea, their hands outstretched, preventing the evil from advancing. This last image wasn't as bright as the rest, and that bothered me a bit, but then the splendor of the entire Story Box swept me away.

It was glorious.

Beautiful.

Amazing.

But…

"Where's Anansi?" Gum Baby asked. She stomped around, looking in the bushes, and splashed through the waterfalls. "Where is he?"

I could feel the energy rolling off of the Story Box in waves. Nyame could feel it, too, I knew, because the adinkra on the hems of his robes flared with golden light, and his eyes did the same. And High John could sense it—his shadow stretched across the rooftop over flowers and statues.

So where was Anansi?

Nyame turned suddenly toward the west and peered out at the ocean. He stood there, frozen, for several moments. "Something is wrong," he whispered. He turned to me. "Close the Box, quickly now!"

A loud roar sounded in the palace below. I flinched, severing my connection with the Story Box. Leopard roared again and again, and High John frowned. Suddenly he too went stiff as he looked over the ocean. Without a word, he twisted into his shadow with a gust of wind, and in the

next instant he took off into the sky on Old Familiar's back. The giant shadow crow cawed as they soared above us.

"What do you see?" Nyame called.

"A burning wave, biggest I've ever seen!" High John shouted back. "It's knocking aside boats like they feathers, sure it is."

"A wave…" Nyame muttered. He turned to me. "Tristan—"

But I wasn't paying attention. My eyes were glued to the marina, where a tsunami carrying columns of fire was sweeping toward us. Boats and oversize yachts crashed into each other with noises that sounded like cannons and gunfire.

"What's happening?" Thandiwe shouted. Gum Baby scrambled up to her perch on my shoulder to look, and she gasped.

Before I could answer, something rose out of the sea, and out of my nightmares, too. A dilapidated vessel, bigger and more horrifying than any bone ship, split the surface, growing larger and larger. Its masts were shattered and its grimy gray sails hung limp and torn. Holes of different sizes dotted the hull, and burning seawater flooded out like lava. Figures moved on the deck.

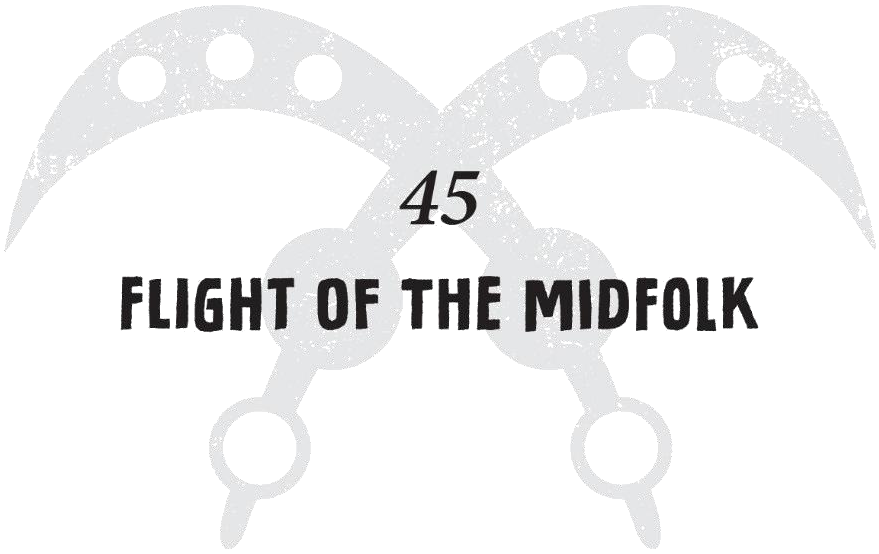
Fetterlings.

Hundreds of them.

And with them came that familiar feeling of suffocating terror. The weight of years, decades, centuries of hate and violence—it all gathered in the air and pressed down on my shoulders. The stench of death and dying, of rot and decay, rolled over me. I knew those feelings. I knew that presence. I'd been inside that vessel. Uncle C was in that thing.

Which meant that ship was—

"The Maafa," I whispered.



# 45
# FLIGHT OF THE MIDFOLK

**“THAT’S THE MAAFA?”**

Thandiwe gripped her forebear-turned-shield tight in one hand and pointed at the massive ship with the other. It vomited fire and fetterlings as it cut through the burning waves. Anything in its path was crushed beneath its hull or charred beyond recognition as it entered the bay. Gray mist and black smoke followed in its wake, while smashed wreckage floated in front of it.

Nyame whirled on me in fury. “You said my people still lived in that thing. Look at it! Tell me how *anything* could survive in that!”

“I saw them!” I protested, but a sinking feeling grew in the pit of my stomach.

How *could* anything live in that?

The sky god turned away in disgust and paced the edge of the palace roof. The leviathan of fire and iron pushed its way into the shallow harbor. The golden spire shuddered as boat after damaged boat was thrown against its base. Nyame fumed, his robes flapping in the ash-flecked wind.

“First my people. Now my land? I cannot allow it.” The sky god pointed at the Story Box. “We did just what this uncle of yours wanted. The beasts will come for it, and we must not let them take it. Otherwise, this”—he gestured at the bay that slowly burned—“will only be the beginning.” His eyes pierced mine. “Your world will be next.”

And with that totally not-ominous statement, Nyame stepped off the roof. As he dropped out of sight, a flare of bright light exploded and streaked through the sky like a missile. It arced high—so high it appeared like a second sun, or the start of a second rip—before dropping down behind a cluster of palaces. I lost sight of it for a second, but the fifty-foot wave that raced toward the invading ship, dousing fire spouts and drowning fetterlings, let me know he had landed in the marina.

And it was because my gaze followed the path of Nyame's flight that I noticed a group of familiar faces.

Gum Baby spotted them, too. "Look!" she shouted. "It's John Henry! And Miss Sarah and Miss Rose! They made it out!"

Thandiwe grinned. "MidPass lives, Tristan. They live."

My knees went weak, but it was a good feeling, like I'd just been declared the winner of a match. John Henry waded through the bay, knocking debris out of his way with a swipe of his glowing hammer. He held a rope in his other hand, and he was pulling several rafts full of people and animals. In the air above, Miss Sarah and Miss Rose carried a large basket of additional refugees between them as they flapped to the shore. I didn't see Brer, but the rest were a sight for sore eyes.

"They rescued the Midfolk," I said. "John Henry understood my message."

Thandiwe glanced at me. "You sent a message? When?"

"Back when High John took me…It's hard to explain, but I did."

She looked skeptical, but instead of questioning me further, she pointed with the knob of her kierie. "Look—we're not the only ones who've spotted them."

A group of fetterlings were swimming across the bay toward the Midfolk. They looked like sharks as they cruised around the burning wreckage, silent and unseen.

Gum Baby pounded a fist into her other hand. "They're not going to make it."

Thandiwe placed her forebear on the ground and stepped on it, then looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "I can reach them. Can you protect the Story Box?"

"I can, but how are you going to get there in time? I thought your forebear only—"

“You think too much about the wrong things,” Thandiwe said. “Do you know why we call them forebears? Because our ancestors are always there, lifting us and carrying us forward, and shielding us when we are vulnerable. Don’t worry about me—worry about doing your part. You sure you can hold?”

I took stock of the scene—the flames, the fetterlings, and the Maafa, and the Midfolk fleeing them all. “I can hold,” I said. “When you reach them, send Brer if you see him—a giant rabbit with scars, talks real slick. But take the rest of them to the Mmoatia forest, to Ayanna and Chestnutt. The fairies will protect them.”

Thandiwe nodded, and without another word, hopped off the roof while slipping the forebear beneath her feet. She landed on a curving ivory buttress and rode it like a skateboarder grinding a railing. The princess ended up in the plaza below with a full head of steam, and she carved down and around the wide paved street, using her kierie as a rudder. Soon she was out of sight, and I sighed.

“Girl’s got skills,” Gum Baby admitted. “Gum Baby taught her well.” I rolled my eyes, then shielded them as a blast of wind blew dust and ash into my face. High John stood on Old Familiar’s back as the shadow crow cawed and flapped above us.

“Tristan, you’ve got company coming!” he shouted. “I reckon you might wanna get ready.”

“What? Where?”

“Got some of them poison flies coming from the south, and fetterlings from the north. Must’ve slipped by in the confusion. This old crow will take care of the bugs—can you handle them chain monsters?”

Sure enough, a dust cloud swept toward Nyame’s palace, and the faint sounds of screeching and rattling carried over the roar of the chaos in the bay. I swallowed hard, then nodded. I only had to hold them off until Brer arrived. Whenever that was. “Yeah, I got this.”

High John studied me and Gum Baby, then nodded. “Reckon you might need this,” he said. He tossed down a sparkling, shiny piece of metal, and Gum Baby snagged it out of midair. “All them other gods giving you protection,” he said. “Might as well do my part, sure I will.”

I pried the charm out of Gum Baby’s sticky grasp. The adinkra was two crossed swords with holes in the blades and handles, and it pulsed with dark light.

“What is this?” I asked.

High John smiled. “The akofena. The Swords of War. Symbol of courage and bravery. For when you need to defend several places at once.”

Old Familiar flapped powerfully up in the air. “Take care now, you hear?” High John called. “Don’t go dying—you and me got some talking to do.” And with that, High John the Conqueror soared into the sky on his giant crow, hooting and hollering as he cut through smoke and flame to confront the swarm of brand flies racing toward us.

As soon as I slipped the adinkra onto my bracelet, four night-black boxing gloves shimmered into view. When I made fists, one pair of gloves floated shoulder-high on either side of me, and the second pair hovered near my waist. I now had six fists ready to pummel some iron monsters. When I relaxed my hands, the gloves disappeared.

I laughed. “Looks like we’re doing some shadow boxing!” I called back to Gum Baby.

She let out a joyous whoop and cartwheeled across my shoulders.

“Bring it on!” she screamed. “Ain’t nobody scared! Gum Baby got two hands eager to deal! This restaurant is open and ready to serve! Get your education for free, you thistle-heads, Gum Baby’s an equal-opportunity destroyer!”

The stampede of fetterlings crashed against the base of the palace, and then the time for words was over.

A fight is a paralyzing thing.

When the time arrived for my first boxing match, I’d thought I was prepared. I mean, I’d trained forever, it seemed. Hit the bag. Ran the streets. Did whatever Dad and Granddad told me to. I was supposed to win.

But in the ring, once I was inside the ropes and everybody else was outside except the kid I had to face, all that practice disappeared. I had two heavy gloves, uncomfortable boots, and the desire to be anywhere else. Who was I kidding? I wasn’t a boxer. I’d just gone along, because that’s what a kid is supposed to do, right? Make his parents happy?

My opponent whupped me in all four corners of the ring.

From the first bell to the last, everything moved too fast. I couldn’t keep up. My guard was too slow, my feet were too slow, my everything was just too dang slow.

But now…

Now I had purpose, which gave me all the energy I needed. I was Old Man Rawlins. I wasn't gonna lose…not today, chumps.

"Watch it!"

Gum Baby's warning came just in time—a rusty collar snapped shut inches from my neck as I jerked back.

"Get the sap out, fool!" Gum Baby flipped in midair, flinging her sticky ammunition at the fetterlings swarming over the rooftop. "Gum Baby always carrying you."

The akofena charm tingled, and my night-gloves flashed into existence. One jab, two jabs, three, and a trio of fetterlings the color of ashy scabs tumbled over the edge in pieces. I risked a glance behind me—the Story Box was still there on the pedestal—and then turned to face another group of screeching metal creatures.

We fought like that, Gum Baby and me, for what seemed like forever. Wave after wave of fetterlings swarmed over the rooftop gardens, and yet somehow we held them back. Gum Baby was a living terror. If she wasn't dancing over the heads of her opponents, she was tumbling through their chain-link bodies, depositing sticky traps that rooted them to the spot. Which left me batting cleanup.

*Pop pop*

My fists were everywhere.

*Pop pop*

Black fists in black gloves delivering black power two jabs at a time. *Pop pop*

Finally, after the last group of fetterlings was repelled, we had a moment of rest. I looked out toward the water and tried to find everyone, to see how they were doing.

Old Familiar dipped and swirled, snapping brand flies out of the air like they weren't moving, the prince-turned-slave-turned-god standing atop and swinging his ax like a scythe through a field of wheat.

Nyame, like a sun flare that leaped from spot to spot, sent iron monsters flying into the bay with blasts of white-hot energy. I couldn't stare for long, or I'd be temporarily blinded. The sky god fought with the fury of exploding stars, and, as a lone god, he was targeted by most of the iron monsters.

But the refugees from Midfolk fought, too, for their very right to live, though they were far from home. John Henry, the raft line wrapped around his waist so he could use both hands, swung his hammer like he was back drilling through a mountain. Left and right, up and down, the hammer fell on fetterlings with the crash of metal on metal. No flourishes, just a steady rhythm.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose circled and dove from above, flaying fetterlings with whiplike switches. They harried and harassed iron monsters like hawks scattering mice. As a result of everyone's efforts, the group made their way up the winding streets of the Golden Crescent unimpeded.

But, try as I might, I couldn't see Brer anywhere.

Instead, Thandiwe led the Midfolk stragglers. I don't know where she'd met up with them, or how she'd convinced them to follow her, but the warrior girl from the Ridge battered fetterlings with grim determination. She was on the ground, her forebear looped over her back, which freed her spear to pin foes to the ground while her kierie hammered them senseless.

Everywhere I looked, fetterlings and brand flies were being destroyed. Yet, despite our progress, more and more of them were being disgorged from the Maafa. The supply seemed endless. And that wasn't all. The ship had reached the marina, and heavy troops were emerging from its fiery decks. Bosslings leaped into the waves, followed by several hullbeasts. They waded through burning waters and debris and lumbered ashore like nightmarish special forces.

"Dang," Gum Baby said from her perch on my shoulder. "Just…dang."

"I know what you mean." The reinforcements pushed Nyame back, even as he blasted them left and right, while still more dropped from the Maafa's decks. Suddenly my friends went from holding their ground to retreating.

And there was still no sign of Brer.

"Come on, Rabbit," I muttered. "Hurry up!" "Tristan, look!"

A group of iron monsters broke off from the marina fight and chased after the Midfolk. Two bosslings and a hullbeast thundered up the street, and my heart plummeted. If they caught up, everyone would suffer, gods or not.

The remaining hullbeasts leaned back and belched forth a mass of brand flies. Shrieks filled the air as the charcoal cloud of metal bugs shot up into

the air. High John and Old Familiar were quickly swarmed.

A shrill cry of pain dragged my attention away. I spun around, heart in my throat, as I caught a glimpse of a dark shape falling from the sky, feathers fluttering down like black snow.

Miss Rose.

She dropped out of view just outside Nyame's palace gates.

"No!" I whispered.

John Henry bellowed in pain, too, and his hammer crashed to the ground like a tree falling. He backed up the curving street, his head the only thing I could see for a moment, the rest of him obscured by flowering trees and gold-covered rooftops. Miss Sarah followed close behind, the fight forgotten as a wail left her lips. More shrieks of pain and confusion rose as the rest of the Midfolk panicked.

A glint of metal winked in the corner of my eye, near the Mmoatia forest palace. Something waited in the trees, right at the spot John Henry and the others were rushing toward.

An ambush!

I had to warn them. Somehow, I had to drag the iron monsters away from Miss Rose and get the others to abandon the ambush. I needed to clear a path for High John so he could link up with the others and rescue the Midfolk.

It was time for a distraction.

Something that everyone, from fetterling to hullbeast, would focus on.

I needed the Story Box.

The restored treasure rested on the ivory column, the rose-gold symbols nearly faded away. It was closed, but I could still feel the thread of stories inside. My feet carried me over on their own, and I saw golden scenes glimmering on top of the chest.

Hold up.

One group of scenes, they showed…

I leaned in closer.

"Sweet peaches."

A figure standing in front of a seated group, a box strapped to his back. The same figure, his arms wide, still wearing the box, but this time it was cracked open. Symbols floating in, and symbols floating out. And finally, the figure walking away, the crowd waving, the box on his back now closed.

*Anansesem didn't just tell stories, they collected them*.

I walked around the Box, forcing myself to move slowly despite every urge to rush, to hurry and save my friends. And when I reached the back panel, where there were two sets of gold lines, I stopped.

*They carried the stories from people to people.*

"They *carried* them," I said, an idea popping into my head. "Here goes nothing." Concentrating, I reached for the rhythm of the story thread inside, and I spoke the sentence Nana started every one of her stories with.

They were the words of the Anansesem, uttered when traveling from village to village to spread the news.

*"Let me give you some truth, and I hope it returns back to me."* All noise stopped.

The winds died, the waves calmed, and every iron monster—from brand fly to bossling—let out a harsh, rattling cry and charged toward Nyame's palace.

Toward me.

But I remained focused on the spectacle right in front of me.

The golden lines on the Box brightened and expanded until two straps extended from the glowing chest. I reached up and grabbed them, lifting the Story Box off the pedestal. I slipped an arm through one, then the other, and shook my head in wonder as the Box stretched and changed and settled against my back.

*It changed depending on who carried it.*

I looked over my shoulder and snorted at the gold-and-black book bag I was now wearing, with golden zippers and a faint hum rippling through it. It was partially open, and the thrum of a half-finished story sent tingles up my spine and down into my fingertips. Adinkra decorated the straps— Nyame's symbol on the left, and Anansi's on the right—and I squeezed them, as nervous as a kid on his first day of school.

"What do we do?" Gum Baby asked.

I stared at her, then at the Story Box, and licked my lips. Uncle C wanted the Story Box? Then we were going to bring him the Story Box.

"Gum Baby, you're not gonna like this."

A few minutes later I walked down the stairs, the Story Box on my back, to give my first official performance as Anansesem to the most dangerous audience I could ever imagine.

I exited the palace and entered the courtyard to face a sea of fetterlings. They quivered as I approached, then parted like magic. My eyes stared straight ahead, even though I could hear them close ranks behind me, cutting off any retreat. But running away was the last thing on my mind.

I had an appointment to keep.

# 46
# A DANGEROUS BARGAIN

**IT WAS THE LONGEST WALK** of my life.

Imagine getting called to come up to the front of the class to solve a problem, but the whiteboard is a mile away. Or going up to the auditorium stage at an all-school assembly to give a speech, and if you mess up, they might drag you out of there, never to be seen again. Or your mom comes to pick you up early and catches you clowning in the back of the classroom, and now you got to walk by all of your friends as she watches you with that *Oh really?* look.

Yeah.

Matter of fact, imagine all three of those things happening at the same time.

Throw in a little terror, a little nausea, and a little *Holy moly, how am I going to survive this,* and you're halfway there.

I didn't look left or right, not even when I passed the Mmoatia grove. Not even when I passed John Henry straining against the grasp of several bosslings. Not even when I passed a quietly sobbing Miss Sarah, the limp and motionless body of Miss Rose lying in her arms. Nope, I didn't meet anyone's eyes as I placed one foot ahead of the other, following the curving street until the dented gold marina spire rose out of the bay in front of me.

And in front of it, Nyame.

Hundreds of destroyed fetterlings lay in mounds around him, like a fort made of defeated enemies, and yet several hundred more live ones circled him. As I approached, their heads snapped around like I was a magnet, and the god in the middle raised his head and glared at me.

His eyes burned like a thousand red-hot coals, and if looks could kill… What am I saying? His looks probably *could* kill. For all I knew, he was shaving off my retirement years.

"You don't know what you're doing," he snarled.

"It's this," I shot back, "or everyone gets dragged into that death ship over there. I'm doing the only thing I can."

He shook his head. "You are dooming us all." And he turned his back on me.

I clenched my fists, but the iron monsters around me began to get closer and closer. Yet they weren't attacking. It was like they were urging me on. I gave Nyame my own glare, then, with a dozen fetterlings following, moved down to the shore, where a collection of rotted planks tied together with swollen, seaweed-covered ropes awaited.

My rusty honor guard herded me to the makeshift raft.

I turned around, saying, "No way," then took a half step back when twelve fetterlings started clanking together, like metal rattlesnakes. "Fine, fine, I'm going."

I stepped onto the raft, and a wave of sadness pulled a lump into my throat. Ayanna's raft was somewhere back in the Ridge. Lost forever, probably. I shook my head and took a deep breath. *Forward*, I thought. *Have to move forward.*

I didn't have a stick or an oar to propel the raft, but the rotted thing jerked into motion by itself, floating slowly at first, then picking up speed. Debris knocked against the sides, and more than one burst of flame erupted out of the water, making me jump each time. Steam hovered over the boiling sea, and a low roar lurked in the background. The tear in the sky, directly above and stretching off into the horizon, smothered everything in a thick heat that made breathing a struggle.

The Maafa lurked just offshore, squat and ugly in the shallows like a diseased leviathan that had washed into the bay. It smelled like it looked and looked like it smelled—filthy, covered in crusty barnacles, with the rotten remains of fish caught between the splintered boards of its hull, and

emitting fumes, the kind that linger in the back of your throat after you leave the gas station.

My eyes and my stomach both wanted to vomit.

The raft followed its invisible leash farther and farther away from shore, away from safety—wherever that was. I drifted closer and closer, until the Maafa loomed over me, and still I floated on. I gagged when I smelled the greenish-black crust that lined the hull, with its odor of old vegetables and the special Alabama grease Nana always smothered on my cuts. Fetterlings, trapped against the side, wriggled weakly in the water.

I finally reached a jagged split in the hull and, as the raft drifted inside it, fetid water dripped down my neck. A familiar setting materialized out of the darkness.

Two torches.

Three steps.

A long passageway shrouded in darkness.

The raft came to a stop, and I gripped the straps of the Story Box (Story Bag? Story Backpack? I hadn't figured that out yet) and stepped onto the stairs. The soggy wooden planks of the deck squelched and sagged under my feet. My breathing echoed in my ears.

I inhaled, trying not to smell the putrid air, and then let it out.

And that's when the ship spoke.

"Thought I told you stories are powerful magic?"

I froze. The voice came from the darkness. But it wasn't Uncle C's, like in my nightmares.

"Well, my boy? Fine mess you got yourself in."

Wait a minute.

Wait. A. Minute.

I knew that voice. But the last time I'd heard it, the owner was telling me—

"Did you at least give me a good

ending?" "Brer Fox? Is that you?"

A wheezy coughing laugh echoed around me. "So it seems. I guess these old whiskers got one last job to do."

I took a step forward, then another. The darkness didn't fade away as much as part around me. The passageway grew narrower and narrower, and when I turned around I could just make out the torches near the hole I'd entered. "I'm here to speak to the Maafa."

The bulkheads groaned and the deck shifted. Boards twisted and realigned, and I threw my hands out to keep my balance, nearly falling when the planks caved in at my touch. I felt something soft and hairy. And warm. I made sure my legs were steady, then glanced over. My hand had pushed through the soggy wood, and underneath—

"Sweet peaches!"

A face.

No, dozens of faces. Some I recognized—Tarrypin, Sis Crow—and others I didn't. These were the victims, the ones the iron monsters had snatched. They'd all been stuffed into the bulkheads and decks of the Maafa.

I jumped back in horror…and their eyes followed me. They *were* alive, but just barely.

"Not pretty, is it?" Brer Fox said in a strained tone.

I pulled my eyes away from the barely breathing folk. "I came to bargain. Can you tell it that? I came to bargain!" I shouted.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" "I do. Now can you tell it that?" "It already knows. It—"

Brer Fox's voice cut off, and I stood in dark silence for several seconds. "BF? BRER FOX!"

"Still here…just…translating." He sounded like he was in pain, and I squeezed the Story Box's straps. He'd gotten trapped because of me, and now he—and the others—were suffering. Just when I got worried and started to shout again, the soggy planks in the deck above my head peeled back like a banana, and Brer Fox dropped down. His limbs were tangled in chains, and a strange orange glow filled his eyes.

"What is the bargain?" he said, and I flinched.

That wasn't Brer Fox's voice. It was deeper, darker, like creaking timber and crashing waves. It was freedom denied. It was silent pain.

It was the Maafa.

"You think you have something we want?" the old evil asked through Fox. "You?"

It was weird—and scary—seeing Brer Fox's mouth move but hearing the haunting voice of the ship. But I had to push past the fear. Everything depended on this moment. Everyone depended on *me.*

I forced myself to start talking again. “You’re carrying something inside of you,” I said.

“We carry a lot of things.” The chains holding Brer Fox forced his legs to walk around me like a grotesque puppet. “The living. The dying. The fear that unites them both. It is what we do.”

“Yeah, but you also carry a haint, and it’s using you. It’s using you to get to me and everybody else on Alke, so it can become more powerful than even you.”

“IMPOSSIBLE!” the Maafa forced Brer Fox to snarl in my face, and I threw my arms out for balance as the ship heaved up and down in the water.

“It’s true!” I yelled.

The chains holding Brer Fox grew taut, and then he was hauled up into the upper deck.

Before I could react, the planks in the bulkhead to my right split apart, and Tarrypin—his shell bundled in chains—was marched out. His eyes were glowing orange, too, and he spoke in the same ancient voice of the Maafa. “So, we have a spirit aboard. What does—?”

“It’s poisoning you.” I took a big risk by interrupting, but time was running out. There was no telling what was happening outside. “And it’s taking the stories your monsters hunt down and hoarding them, getting stronger. Soon it will take over and make *you* a victim.”

The possessed Tarrypin shook his wrinkled head. “Your story does not impress us. Even if such a stowaway existed, it could never surpass our might. We will—”

“It does, and it can, with this.” I shrugged off the backpack and it transformed into the golden Story Box. I held it out.

There was a momentary pause, and then Tarrypin was yanked back into the bulkhead. A short distance down the passageway, the deck opened like a trapdoor, and a teenage girl stepped out, walking lightly despite the manacles on her ankles.

“Netta?” I whispered. “No.”

But the girl I’d met back in MidPass didn’t raise her blazing eyes. Instead, they stayed pinned to the Story Box.

“You carry the words of the gods,” the Maafa said. “You are… Anansesem.” For the first time, I heard a note of concern in the voice. “Yes,” I said. “And like I said, I’ve come to make a bargain.”

I could feel the Maafa's consideration in the silence that followed. When it next spoke, the ship was almost thoughtful:

"Why shouldn't we just take the cursed sky god's treasure and rule the lands as we like?"

This I was prepared for. "Because you wouldn't rule it for long. The haint infesting you would grow too powerful for even you to contend with, and he'd destroy you. But there's another way." I hesitated, then inhaled and let out a deep breath. "I will tell your story."

The entire ship stilled. The creaking, the rustling, the clinking chains— it all fell silent as the Maafa registered my words. Then:

"You would tell…our story?"

I nodded. It was a gamble, and a lot of people in Alke wouldn't like it, but it had to be done. "People don't speak of the Maafa anymore. They shush any mention of you. Children don't know your name. Soon you'll be erased from the histories of Alke entirely."

I put the box down on the floor. The images on its sides, including the one of Anansi and Nyame confronting the Maafa, were barely visible. As Netta's eyes stayed on the Story Box, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the Maafa's tale.

The Maafa is pain, John Henry had said. *It came here with the first of us. The sadness to our joy.*

Drums pounded in my ears and my fingertips tingled. I opened my eyes in time to see the Story Box glowing, and projecting images on the bulkhead. An inky black leviathan leaped forward along the planks, only to be met by a group of familiar beings: a giant man with a shining hammer, two soaring shadows with blazing wings, a man with golden eyes, and a spider clinging to a line of sparkling silk. They all clashed with the formless beast, eventually casting it back into the darkness below.

The Story Box flared white-hot in the dark before it faded to a dull glow, and a sigh seemed to settle throughout the hull of the ancient ship.

After several seconds, Netta lifted her glowing eyes to me. "You would tell this story?"

I raised my chin. "I would tell the tale of how all the gods of MidPass and Alke united to defeat a powerful foe. Yes, I would tell that story."

The open secret of the Maafa had been bothering me throughout my time here, and it had taken something High John said to make me understand. You shouldn't try to hide from your pain. You shouldn't run

from it, cover it up, pretend it never happened. That's what John Henry and Nyame and all the other gods had tried to do with the Maafa. That's what I'd tried to do with Eddie. Uncle C thought he'd hurt me by taking all my good memories of my best friend, but he'd only helped me face my feelings.

As Anansesem, it was my job to carry the stories of the land to its people. *All* the stories. If we ignored the past, how would we learn from it?

I waited for the Maafa's decision.

The Story Box's light dimmed, and the passageway seemed to widen a bit. The trapdoor in the deck disappeared, and the bulkhead planks straightened. Netta, still possessed by the Maafa, raised both arms.

"We return to our rest, and you will tell our tale?"

"And," I added, "I'll even get rid of that haint for you. A two-for-one. Because I'm that kind of guy."

Netta nodded, and she stepped to the side. Two planks in the bulkhead shifted apart like they were made of rubber, and the girl disappeared into the darkness.

Something rustled in the upper deck, and Brer Fox's voice sounded above me. "I don't know how or why, or what you said, but it agreed. You have to be careful, though, my boy. Provided you hold up your end of the bargain, as soon as you rid the ship of the haint, the Maafa will return to the bottom of the sea. And if it just so happens you can't escape in time, both you and the Story Box will ride down to the deep along with it."

His voice broke off and I nodded grimly. "I understand."

"I know you do, my boy, I know you do. Forgive an old fox his worry. Take heart—you can do this." His voice began to fade away, and I stopped myself from dashing to the wall to beg him to stay and help me. A last chuckle floated in the air. "Seems like hope lives after all."

"Wait!" I shouted. "Are you—all of you—coming back?" Silence.

Then, "I reckon some will. But I like how my story ended, my boy. And I'm tired…so, so tired. Figure I might just rest for a bit."

"Fox," I called. "FOX!"

And then there was nothing but me and the empty passageway, a nondescript door waiting at the end. Something rolled down my cheek, but I didn't bother with it. Whether it was the sea's salt water or my own, it

wouldn’t help with what came next. I hefted the Story Box back onto my shoulders and started walking before fear talked me out of it.

I had made a bargain with the Maafa.

Now it was time to deal with Uncle C.

# 47
# KING COTTON

**“WELL, COME ON IN, TRISTAN,** don’t be shy. You letting out all the heat.”

It took a few heartbeats—several pulse-pounding heartbeats—before my eyes adjusted to the gloom. The passageway had been dim, but this room was two shadows short of midnight black.

The layout mirrored my visions. There, in the corner, the barrels stacked up to the deck. The rectangular burlap bags, their faded black letters illegible in the dark. And mounds, I mean mounds, of the white—

“Cotton,” I said, astonished.

“Smart boy. Smart, smart boy. That’s why I like you, wanna help you.” I didn’t see the haint at first. Cotton was strewn across the floor, piled up in the corners, and bursting out of several stained, split-open bundles. But there, in the highest mound in the far corner, lay the figure of what used to be a man.

Uncle C.

Uncle *Cotton*.

From what I could see, he was stylish. He wore a pair of fine, polished patent leather dress shoes, silk dress socks, creased trousers, and had a pocket-watch chain dangling from the pocket. But that’s all I could see. The top half of him lay beneath a white heap of soggy cotton. The only thing

showing above his waist was the left side of his face—ashy, pale, and blistered around the lips. His eye, blue as the bay outside, blinked open, and the corner of his mouth crinkled into a smile.

"Lookie here, lookie here. Look what the cat dragged in. I'd get up, but…well, I'm a bit under the weather." He laughed, a raspy chuckle that irritated my ears like forks scraping against plates. "Well, come in, come in, don't be shy. We gots a lot to talk about, don't we?"

I studied him.

This was the architect of nearly everything bad that had happened in MidPass and Alke. The one who had stirred up the bone ships, the iron monsters, the hullbeasts, the brand flies. The evil behind the abductions of people and animals and the pillaging of their homes. Because of him, Ayanna was suffering, maybe even…

He watched me study him, but when I squeezed the straps on my shoulders, his eyes latched on to my backpack, and a suspicious look crossed his face. "What you got there?"

For a second my heart thudded in my chest like the war drums in the Ridge. I hid it, though, and shuffled closer. Just a bit.

"I brought you what you wanted. Now give me my memories."

"I told you to bring me the Story Box, not some raggedy knapsack! Where is it?" Uncle Cotton demanded.

"Right here," I said, patting my backpack. "Where's my journal? Where are my memories?" My voice felt thick and speaking was difficult. My chest wouldn't stop heaving, and my palms were sweating.

He eyed me, then chuckled. "Straight to the point. Okay. I like that. No shucking and jiving around the issue. Well, my boy—"

"I'm…not…your…boy," I said, breathing hard after every word. His

eyebrow rose. "Okay, then, okay. No need for rudeness. I thought you were better than that. You *are* better than that, I know it. You and me, we're the same. Determined. Focused. Driven. I understand what you're going through, believe me. Having something stripped away. Ripped from you. The loneliness. The emptiness."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Give. Me. My. Journal."

"Okay. Okay. Everything you need is right there."

I opened my eyes to see that he had shifted slightly, so his face pointed toward the corner off to my right. I spied a door, its bottom half covered in

thick roots and thorny vines, and my spirits sank. “How am I supposed to get in there?”

I’ve never seen a half-face look more apologetic. “Tristan, Tristan. I told you, you gots to trust me. What you’re missing is in that room, beyond that there tangle, and I can get you to it. I told you I could help, and I will, believe me. But I can’t do nothing like this.” His eye looked down at his buried torso before fixing me with a pleading gaze. “You’ve got to help me if you want me to do the same. I told you. Free me, and I can free everybody.”

“Free you…” I repeated.

Uncle Cotton grimaced, a cruel twist of the face. “My own fault, really. This world is built on the power of story, boy. Seems my story is intertwined with this here floating death palace. Cotton and the Maafa.”

“Greed and enslavement,” I whispered.

Cotton shifted, a movement I realized was a shrug. “Nature of the beast. Funny, right? You freed me, only for me to end up tangled in something even stronger.”

His pale eye flicked to the Story Box. I took a step back.

“But with that…Ohhh yeah, with that, I could rewrite my own story. You went from chump to champ. Imagine what *I* could become. The legends. The history! It’s the only way,” he said. Something rustled in the mountain of cotton, and a withered hand, with nails black and sharp, rose feebly out of the white fluff. “Give it to me. Let me help you.”

I hesitated.

“Let me help you,” he whispered again, and the insistent demand wormed its way into my brain.

I slipped off the backpack and held it in my right hand. “And you’ll give me my memories, and the journal? Right away?”

A snarl rippled across his half-face before it faded and a smile appeared. “Sure, Tristan, sure thing, just as soon as you free me, I’ll get it to you. You’ll have what you want. All your stories—every single one. Heck, here’s a few reminders to get you started, just so you know I’m on the level.”

He took a deep breath, then blew gently on the cotton in front of him. Little strands of white, barely visible in the dark, floated toward me like a cloud. I backed up, but the threads consumed me. I froze in fear, feeling a tingling sensation that started in the center of my spine and moved upward, increasing in strength as it went, until my forehead buzzed.

Eddie's smiling face popped into my mind. Both of us, sitting at the table, going over our English project. Eddie at the corner store. Eddie holding the heavy bag for dear life as I threw hooks and crosses and jabs and straights. The memories swept over me and I felt months of stress leak out of my shoulders.

"Now then…" The buried haint's lone eyebrow was arched again, and it brought me back to the present like a splash of ice-cold water to the face. Anansi's adinkra burned hot against my wrist, and I fiddled with it and the Amagqirha's bead.

"A deal's a deal, Tristan."

I nodded, swallowed, then took a step forward and dropped the backpack into his straining hand. He fumbled with it, then snagged a strap and clutched it tight. He inhaled, then exhaled, and the skin on his face seemed to ripple.

"Help me," he demanded. "Help me out of here."

This was it. Once he was free, everything would hang by a thread. I prayed I'd thought this plan through enough as I inched closer. I scooped handfuls of soggy cotton away from him, like wet sand at the beach. The waterlogged fibers weighed a ton, and they clung to my fingers as I tried to hurl piles away. Slowly, a body began to emerge from the mess.

A head with stringy gray hair slicked back tight to his skull.

Teeth bright white—so white they seemed fake, except for the single gold tooth in the back.

And he was rail thin.

He wore a matching suit jacket, and beneath it, a collared shirt starched stiff.

Uncle Cotton hugged the Story Box tight. Before my eyes his face lost its wrinkles, smoothing out to look like that of a much younger man, and the cotton…All the cotton in the room began to tremble. Slowly at first, but soon each dingy white ball bounced and hopped as if in an earthquake. They rolled on the floor and tumbled down from the piles in the corners, hightailing it to where Uncle Cotton lay with his eyes closed, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. They bounced down his collar, rolled into his sleeves and pant legs, even into his socks.

Soon all the cotton in the room was gone. It filled his clothes like straw in a scarecrow.

All that was left were the thorny roots digging into the bottom of the door to the next compartment.

I had to get him to remove those, too, or this plan was doomed. “Help me up.”

His voice, stronger and more confident, grabbed my attention, and I stretched out an arm. His hands felt like leathery claws as they slipped around my wrist like handcuffs. But he was light—so light it surprised me. Cotton spilled out of his jacket sleeves and pant cuffs before it was drawn back inside like a yo-yo on a string. He patted down his hair and kept the right side of his face turned away from me, though his left eye rolled toward me and winked.

“Ahhh. You don’t know how good it feeeeeels, being free from that there prison. Trapped like a hog before dinnertime, I swear. And this—” He held up the Story Box by its two straps and stopped speaking as the magical treasure slowly morphed back into the shape of a chest. He giggled, and the giggle turned into a chuckle, which grew into a hearty laugh that sounded wet and loose.

“Ha-haaaaa, lookie here. Boy, I feel that power, let me tell you. I can feel it right as rain. Hoo-whee! We gonna have us a party!”

He fumbled at the lid, trying to release the catch. It held fast, and his smile slowly faded as he tried again and again to open the Story Box. He grunted, swore, dropped it to the floor and pulled with both hands. He looked up and I flinched—the right side of his face, up to and surrounding his right eye socket, was a mass of viney wood stems and shredded cotton. His eye socket blazed and he snarled.

“Why won’t this thing open?”

I licked my lips. “Because only I can open it.”

“Well, then do it, boy! Ain’t got time for your games!”

The door behind him was still covered in roots. I took a deep breath, then shook my head. “No.”

“No?” He barked the word so violently, my hands were up and my fists clenched before I realized it. His teeth were bared and his clawlike fingernails suddenly became longer and sharper, like talons. They grew and grew, twisting and turning toward me, and too late I realized they were slender branches, thin itchy switches with barbed hooks. They snaked around my wrist and up my arm, digging into my skin, and Uncle Cotton leaned in close.

“No?” he repeated.

“Not”—I squeezed the words through my teeth—“before you give me my journal. Like you said.”

He looked ready to spit. Maybe worse. The branches tightened around my wrist, as proof of what they could do, and then they loosened enough so I could talk without wincing. Red marks crisscrossed my left arm.

Uncle Cotton swallowed whatever curse dangled on his tongue, and suddenly the smooth, polished smile was back. “Okay, then, okay. Sure, you’re right. Gotta help. But I gotta make sure you’re on the level. I need to know I can trust you, Tristan. I’m gonna have to rely on you when we get outside. We came to this world together, and if we go out there as a team and you let them know I’m here to help, to be a savior…shoot, ain’t no stopping us. I’ll be a hero. That’s what they’re looking for, right? A hero to come trotting along and rescue them from themselves? Well, here I am.”

He preened, even as the rumbles of the Maafa smashing against the Golden Crescent shook the room. His blue eye narrowed, a calculating look entering it, and the cotton branches began to squeeze me again as he grew even more excited.

“They might give me the keys to the city. I mean, look at you—they gave you all sorts of godly charms and you just a boy with a few stories. *Anansi’s chosen one*. Ha!” He scoffed. “Wait until a *real* tale-teller, a word-spinner, a true weaver, comes along. They’ll forget all about that spider and his little brood.”

He froze as a thought struck him.

“They might even make me king.”

His cotton-encrusted eye socket fixed on me, and terror gripped me so fiercely I couldn’t breathe.

“Yeah. King Cotton. That’s got a real ring to it, don’t it, boy?”

A peal of thunder rumbled in the distance. Drums and shouts echoed in my ears.

My mouth moved, once, twice, three times, before something resembling a word crawled out of it. “Y-yeah.”

“Aw, don’t worry, King Cotton will take care of his friends. You could be my ward, my heir apparent. Play your cards right, and you could have your own little palace here. Pick any one you want—they’re all empty.”

He cackled and slapped his knee.

“My…memories…” I gasped out past the pulsing pain in my arm.

“Right, right. Getting ahead of myself. Well, go ahead, Tristan, get your little friend’s stories and let’s shut this raiding party down. You and I got some planning to do.”

His right eye turned bright white as he puffed out his narrow chest, sucked in a mouthful of air, and blew a stream of cottonseed-filled air at the door. The vines creeping around the compartment shriveled and peeled away, like flowers wilting under the baking sun. Soon nothing remained but little piles of dirt scattered on the creaking wooden deck. The pain in my arm faded as the branches untwisted and retreated back into his fingernails.

Uncle Cotton beamed. “Happy?”

Memories rushed back into my mind like a floodgate had been opened. Cotton watched, then pointed to the newly opened door. Inside the cell-like compartment, a brown book lay against the wall.

Eddie’s journal.

An ominous rumble rattled the deck as I crossed the few feet to pick up the little book. Its leather cover was warped and the pages were water-stained, but you know what? I didn’t care. It was Eddie’s, it was mine, and I had it once more.

The deck shuddered again, and Uncle Cotton looked around with a frown. “Now what’s got this hunk of junk all up in arms?”

A small smile crossed my face. The Maafa was keeping its promise. I’d gotten Uncle Cotton’s tendrils out of the hull, and now the ship was preparing to return to the bottom of the sea, where it belonged.

A seam appeared in the deck between two planks, and water started bubbling through. I backed away. Time was running out. I turned to head through the passageway, only to find Uncle Cotton standing in front me, the Story Box extended, a weird gleam in his blue eye.

“You ain’t thinking about skipping out on me, is you? Tristan? Naw, you wouldn’t do that. You a man of honor! Like me…I held up my end of the bargain. You got your little book. Now it’s time for you to open the Story Box.”

A section of the hull broke off behind him with a loud *crack*, and green seawater began to gush inside.

“Open it!” Uncle C shouted.

I flinched. “Okay, okay.” I took a deep breath, then reached for the Story Box, pulling on the thread that connected tales from all over the world, and the lid opened, spilling bright golden light into the flooding room.

Uncle C started to laugh. The raspy sound grew louder and louder as the Maafa fell apart around the haint and me. “Yes! Yeesssss! Wait…What in the—?”

He bent his head closer to the Story Box, lifting it to his face, and then jerked back when a quick flurry of sap balls flew out and smacked him in the eyes.

“Heard you was looking for these hands,” a tiny voice shouted from inside the Story Box. “Well, here they are, and Gum Baby gonna deliver them to you free of charge. Sap attack!”

The little loudmouth flipped out of the Story Box, light trailing off her like streams of glitter. Gum Baby jumped on top of the haint’s head and fired sap ball after sap ball into his face, until he wore a mask of sticky dark amber.

“Return of the sap, needle-head! Don’t call it a gum-back!”

Uncle C grunted as he struggled beneath the weight of the sap being absorbed by his cottony self.

“That’s for Chestnutt! And that’s for Ayanna! And that’s for having the nerve to throw rocks at the throne, chump! You no good, mealy-mouthed, dandelion-faced thistle-head!”

“Gum Baby,” I shouted, “let’s go!”

“Snot-snorter!”

“Gum Baby!”

She kicked him upside the head one more time for good measure, and that last effort made the haint topple backward into the water rising around our feet. As he fell, I snatched the Story Box from his hands. After it transformed into the black-and-gold book bag, I put it on and Gum Baby scrambled on top.

“Tristan!” Uncle C wriggled in the water, his cotton getting even heavier now, and spat sap out of his mouth. “Don’t you leave me like this, boy! I helped you! None of them folks out there lifted a finger for you before I did! I made you what you are, boy—don’t you leave me!”

Another splintering crack echoed like a gunshot deep in the Maafa, and the ship tilted, lifting me higher while Uncle Cotton slid to the other side. Water came rushing down the passageway. There was no exiting the way we’d entered. That left the compartment behind us, where Eddie’s journal had been stashed, and I darted toward it. Maybe there was a porthole I could

—

“Tristan!” The lack of emotion in Uncle C’s voice forced my head around before I could stop myself. His head faced in my direction, his eyes still covered in sap. The bulkhead closest to him slowly broke apart. “You know this ain’t over, right? I will find you, boy. I will find you and—”

The sea stormed in, foaming and angry, carrying broken planks and limp fetterlings, and flushed the haint away in mid-threat.

The water hadn’t reached the little room yet, but I could feel the ship going down. Gum Baby climbed onto my shoulder. “We need to move, Bumbletongue, and fast.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the maelstrom. “You’re right.”

And I entered the next room just as the upper deck fell with a groaning smash.

# 48
# LAST STOP

**“UM…” GUM BABY WHISPERED AS** the door slammed shut behind us. “This ain’t what I was thinking of when I said we needed to escape.”

I couldn’t answer, though I happened to agree.

The inside of a school bus stretched out in front of us.

“About time you showed up, nimrod,” someone said from the rear. A thin boy, wearing a Malcolm X T-shirt and sporting a DIY haircut, sat up from where he’d once been sprawled by a gaping hole in the side of the bus. “You still slower than the next payday.”

“You know this guy?” Gum Baby asked.

I opened and closed my mouth several times, speechless. How? My wrist tingled, and I lifted the adinkra bracelet and stared at the silver bead. *Commune with the spirits,* the diviner had said.

I took a deep breath, then cleared my throat. “He is…was…my best friend.”

Eddie still looked…like Eddie. Short and skinny. He even *felt* real—he held out his fist as I walked closer, gripping the very real green seat backs, and after a few seconds I dapped him up, staring at him when our knuckles connected.

“Is Cotton gone?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, he’s gone. For now.”

“Try to contain your excitement, my guy.” Eddie pushed his glasses up on his nose. “I heard the racket from in here. Sounded like y’all put the hurt on him. The heroes in your comics would be proud.”

Gum Baby peeked over my shoulder. “Gum Baby did the hurting, ghost nerd. Respect the sap or get clapped.”

I rolled my eyes, but Eddie snorted. I could see the seat through him, and it weirded me out. This wasn’t a dream or a vision or even a story I’d been sucked into. My best friend was sitting right there, grinning at me. But he was dead.

“Feels weird, huh?”

“Yeah.” I sat down on the seat across from him, still slightly shocked. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

“Dang straight.”

Mist rolled around our ankles, filled the front rows, and obscured the windows. If I didn’t look around, if I kept my eyes locked on Eddie, I could imagine I was back in Chicago.

But I wasn’t.

“Where are we?” I asked.

Eddie leaned back against the beat-up seat and traced a name that had been scribbled on the vinyl in black marker. Finally he sighed and took off his glasses, cleaning them on his shirt. Funny that he even needed them anymore. “We’re still inside.”

“Inside?”

“Inside the Maafa.” He slipped his glasses back on and bounced his fists on his knees while tapping his feet. That was Eddie. Unless he was reading, he just couldn’t sit still. “Cotton, ever since he’s arrived, he’s been feeding your stories to this ship. Can you believe that? He was using your stories—and Nana’s stories—as a way to track you. Every time you did your Anansi thing, he listened in and then sent those chain monsters after you.”

I sank back into the seat, feeling sick to my stomach. Ayanna had been right. They’d been following me. I’d led the iron monsters to MidPass, to the Golden Crescent, to Isihlangu. Everyone suffered because—

“Oh, quit moping,” Eddie broke in. He shook his head. “None of this is your fault. The Maafa and the monsters were already here. Cotton was the one who stirred them up, not you. Well, punching the Bottle Tree was pretty bad. And I guess that did let him loose, so, if I’m being technical, it *is* all your fault.”

“Gee, thanks,” I muttered, and he grinned for a second, before sighing and biting his nails.

“What?” I asked.

“What what?”

“You only bite your nails when you’re nervous.”

Eddie looked at his nails. “Even dead I can’t stop doing that.” “So what’s up?”

He didn’t say anything for a few moments, then he sighed. “This is it, Tristan.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is it. After you leave, show’s over. No more…no more talking.”

The implications of what he was saying slowly dawned on me, and it was like someone had pulled my heart out. Again.

“But…but—”

Eddie shook his head. “I’m only here because Cotton kept me here, and you needed help. Now that you’ve separated him from the Maafa, I’m taking this bus to the end of the route.”

I hugged his journal to my chest, and he grinned. “Cheer up, man—you’re a hero! Celebrate! People are going to want you to come and tell stories. While you’re at it, put my stories in a few more ears out there. Make me famous, Anansesem. I wanna be the next person to become a legend after they die. I’ll be like Tupac and Socrates—Tupacrates!”

He clapped and erupted in his wheezing, nasally laugh, the one that was super contagious. Sure enough, I started chuckling too as he kept laughing. Even Gum Baby snickered in my ear.

“Gum Baby likes him. Ask him about precoffinary measures.” I rolled my eyes.

Eddie stopped laughing and sighed. He checked his watch, then pushed his glasses up again. “All right, bro, it’s time to go.”

“You?”

“No, you. This is your stop.”

I tried to look outside the windows but couldn’t see anything beyond the mist. Eddie pointed toward the front door of the bus.

“Gotta go that way. And hey, as you’re leaving, check on all those folk the Maafa had stuffed in the decks and cargo hold. They’re gonna need some help getting to shore.”

I stood and grabbed the top of the seat, trying to figure out how to say what I wanted to say.

Eddie being Eddie, he just went ahead and said it.

"I'll miss you, too." He grinned. "Maybe I'll come back and haunt your D-twenties. Those dice are too unlucky for you."

He held out a fist again, and, with a small smile of my own, I bumped it. With Gum Baby on my shoulders, I walked backward toward the front of the bus, keeping him in sight. I fixed that image of him in my mind—the smiling, glasses-wearing knucklehead who'd always had my back no matter what. That's the Eddie I chose to remember.

"Oh hey, Tristan, I almost forgot." Eddie's call stopped me in mid– sentimental thought.

"What's up?"

He grinned, wider and more conspiratorial, and my eyes went big.

"No, don't say it…" I warned.

Impossibly, the grin grew even wider.

"Eddie…"

"Look in the next room! You're talking to the wrong one!" he shouted, and then he and his cackles were swallowed by the mist.

I sighed and faced front.

I felt Gum Baby twist around to look back. "And Gum Baby thought you were weird. No wonder y'all were friends."

"Yeah," I said, stepping out of the bus door. "No wonder."

We found ourselves in a different compartment, where the water came up to my ankles and I had to crouch to avoid bumping my head on the upper deck. The windowless space we had entered was about the size of the cafeteria at my school, but it wasn't made for tall people. Either that or no one ever stood upright in here. The bulkhead and decks were all made of rough, dark planks. Fragments of wooden crates and barrels lay in piles in different corners, along with rusted metal chains.

"Where are we?" Gum Baby asked.

"Maybe a cargo hold? Still on the Maafa, at least."

We were whispering. I don't know why, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to us than I had to. The area felt tainted…like at any second

a hundred haints just as evil as Cotton would arise out of the wood and yank our souls to somewhere painful.

A dark lump lay on a platform sticking out of the far wall. Beside it was a door, banded in iron and bolted shut.

Gum Baby pointed at the lump.

"What's that, Gum Baby don't like it, what is it?"

Something touched my leg, and I leaped up in fright, hitting my head on the ceiling. "Ow!"

"Watch it!" Gum Baby shouted, slipping down to sit on top of the backpack. "You trying to kill Gum Baby?"

"Sorry." I held my hand over my heart. Water sloshed my ankles and I kicked off something slimy. "Looks like the ship is flooding."

"Well, get moving. Gum Baby ain't liking this place too much."

"Me neither. I think I know what kind of cargo was held here."

"Oh yeah? What?"

"People."

But instead of heading to the door, I angled toward the dark shape.

"No, fool, don't go toward the mysterious and possibly deadly trap! Head away, to the door! Oh, for the love of—"

"Eddie said we'd find something here," I muttered as the hairs along the back of my neck began to rise. "It'll only take a second."

"Well, it's starting to get mighty wet, and Gum Baby took a bath last month, so don't take forever."

I stopped a few feet away from the dark shape.

Gum Baby peeked over my shoulder. "What is it? Another ghost friend?"

"No," I said grimly, as a light switch flipped on in my head. I had an answer, but it brought more questions along with it. "You're gonna have to get back in the Box, though. I need to carry him over my shoulders."

Gum Baby looked at me in confusion. "Carry who?"

I shook my head, too angry to talk. It was time for one last confrontation.

# 49
# TRICKING THE TRICKSTER

**WHEN THE MAAFA SAID IT** was returning to the depths of the Burning Sea, it meant it. A few minutes after I emerged from the door in the cargo hold and stepped onto a large floating piece of wood, I watched the giant ship sink in front of my eyes. The survivors around me—people and animals who had been trapped within its planks—cheered weakly as they clung to their own pieces of flotsam and kicked toward the shore. The giant tear in the sky bathed the beaches and coastline of the Golden Crescent in a red-orange blaze. The fires in the sea had gone out, but it looked like Nyame's city was burning brighter than ever, and the gilded domes and shining ivory towers reflected all that light back onto the bay.

Back onto the Maafa's watery grave.

And back onto me, surfing among floating debris, angry as all get-out.

The iron-monster army had disappeared along with the Maafa. Whatever malevolent energy had been powering them was shut off, and they broke apart in screeching showers of rusty confetti. Their remains drifted down like ash onto the sand, the surface of the water, everything. Some got on me, but I couldn't muster the energy to care.

My blood was boiling.

I should have felt some relief, some happiness—the iron monsters were gone. Done for. They wouldn't be hunting Midfolk or Alkeans again.

But no—all I felt was rage.

Limp bodies littered the beach—more captives released from the hull and decks of the Maafa. They coughed and spluttered as they sat up drowsy and confused. Some I recognized. Others, Gum Baby said, had been missing for months.

“There’s Old Wilkins! He went out to get some sugar and never came home.”

“Mm,” I grunted.

“And look! There’s one of Sis Crow’s nephews. That featherbrain owes Gum Baby some money.”

“Mm.”

“DON’T THINK GUM BABY FORGOT, BRITTLE BEAK! AIN’T NO IRON MONSTER TAKE YOUR WALLET! BETTER COME UP OFF OF WHAT YOU OWE GUM BABY!”

My heart lifted at the sight of John Henry towering over everyone as he took a head count. Thandiwe waved her kierie at me. Nyame, flanked by Leopard and Python, took stock of the damage to the marina.

A lot of folks were hurt. Miss Sarah held Miss Rose, whose right wing was bandaged to her side. The two beamed at me, though Miss Sarah’s eyes flicked back to her partner with worry every so often. Even John Henry held his right shoulder where his shirt had been torn away and a leafy bandage was wrapped in place.

But…

Alkeans still stood on one side, Midfolk on the other. Even after all this, the distrust was still there. If anything, from the glares being shot across the sand, the muttering, and the buzzing tension, it looked like things had only become worse.

Because of me, yes. Because of my actions. I had to own that.

But someone had lied to me.

Someone had sent me to steal Nyame’s Story Box. The assignment had sown even more distrust between Midfolk and Alkeans, dividing them at a time when, if they’d worked together, they could’ve stopped the Maafa before it had gotten so strong. Before Cotton’s thorns had dug in so deep. And, just like the haint, this person had wanted the Story Box for its power.

But the Story Box was drained and useless, and there were only two ways to refill it. The first was by stealing tales from this world and mine,

whichever ones he could get his thieving hands on. That's why he sent Gum Baby to steal Eddie's journal.

The second? An Anansesem.

All of this just so he would get all the glory and the power.

Like John Henry and High John had both told me, stories fed the gods and heroes in Alke.

I glared as that someone shouldered his way past John Henry and stood with his arms folded across his chest.

Before I approached him, I hid the bundle I was carrying behind a sand dune. I mumbled out of the side of my mouth, "Gum Baby, here's what we're gonna do…." Then I brushed off my hands and walked over to the assembled crowd.

"Tristan!" John Henry boomed. "I don't know what you did, but I'm fixing to slap your back until the morning, boy. You saved us all!"

"And look who's all better," said Thandiwe. "The Mmoatia worked nonstop to help them recover." The warrior shook her head. "I'm still not exactly sure what sort of antidote they used…."

Ayanna limped forward, cradling a bright-eyed Chestnutt. Ayanna slapped me upside the head, though at least this time she was weak. "I told you to be careful, flyboy, not to start a war." She smiled when she said it, though.

I gave her a gentle one-armed hug and grinned, but it didn't last long. She noticed and elbowed me. "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer, because right then Nyame strode forward, his golden robes absorbing the light and scattering it across the beach like a million pieces of glass. He looked better than I'd ever seen him, though the marks left by the brand-fly crown hadn't completely faded.

"Well done, young Strong," Nyame said. "You—"

"Well, kiss my wrist, I bet you think you're hot stuff now!" High John interrupted loudly as he sauntered up to congratulate me. I couldn't help but notice that he still held his ax. Nyame noticed it, too, and his golden eyes narrowed. Leopard growled, and High John sniffed.

"Purr at me again, little kitty, I'll be wearing you soon."

Leopard sank into a crouch, ready to pounce, and High John's ax flared to life.

"Enough!" I shouted.

"Yes, that is quite enough," another voice piped up.

I tried not to grit my teeth as Brer Rabbit hopped forward and placed a paw on my shoulder. It was hard.

Like, really hard.

But I needed to stall.

"The boy here," Brer continued, "has done well, in spite of the many, many, *many* mistakes that we will address later. One of which," he said, twitching his whiskers at me, "was not following directions as they were given. I seem to recall instructing you to bring the Story Box straight back to MidPass. Hmm? Is that not so? I believe it is, if my memory serves me correctly, and—unlike someone I know—*mine* always serves me correctly."

The snarky chastising rubbed every single one of my nerves the wrong way. But I didn't get angry—or *angrier*.

I just waited.

Brer continued. "Had you just done what I asked, some of this unnecessary violence might have been prevented." The giant rabbit shuddered before smoothing his whiskers down and straightening his ears. "No matter. Lessons learned, I'm sure. We can't all be calm and cool under pressure, now, can we? No, don't answer—it was a rhetorical question. I'm afraid we were right—you just don't have what it takes to be the hero that unites Alke, young man. So sad. Truly. I'm crushed."

He tried to twist his mouth into a disappointed expression, but it ended up looking like a smirk.

"Now, if you'll kindly hand over that Story Box, I will start fixing this mess you caused with that temper of yours."

He held out a paw, and I resisted the urge to slap it away. Instead, I backed up.

"What are you doing? Come now, boy, this isn't the time for games."

A small dark shape flipped across the sand behind him, and I tried not to look at Gum Baby as she scrambled up John Henry's shoulder. The giant man jerked in surprise, then relaxed when he saw who it was. He opened his mouth, but Gum Baby shushed him and whispered in his ear. She showed him Nyame's bright adinkra charm, which winked under the red blaze of the hole in the sky, then pressed it against his temple.

"This is not a joking matter, Tristan," said Brer. "Hand over the Story Box!"

He lunged forward to snatch the straps of my backpack, but I skipped to the left to put some space between us. Brer tried again, and I ducked,

leaving him clutching at air. Dad would've been proud of my bobbing and weaving.

"Now look, you spoiled little child," he wheezed.

I held out the backpack and taunted him. "Is this what you want?"

He glared at me. "Blast it, boy! You'd cross a hero? You are more foolish than I thought. Give me that, or so help me,

I'll—" "You'll what?" I teased.

By this time Gum Baby had leaped from John Henry—who stood awestruck by what he had just learned—to High John, and now she dropped to where Miss Sarah and Miss Rose sat. I needed her to hurry up and get to the Alkeans. They needed to see this, too.

"You'll what? Stomp your little paws again? Go ahead. The Thicket is gone, remember? Whatever magic was in those thorns burned away when the iron monsters attacked."

Brer stopped chasing me for a second to catch his breath. "Because…of *you*," he said, panting. "You did this! Your childish anger, your tantrums, your incessant"—he lunged forward again, but I was ready for it—"need for attention. You brat! You spoiled brat!"

Gum Baby finally reached Thandiwe and Nyame. The Ridge warrior's frown turned into a gasp when the doll touched the adinkra to the side of her head. Then the little acrobat spun through the air to land on top of Nyame's fuzzy golden-gray afro. Honestly, I was worried about the sky god the most. Sometimes the closest people fool us the longest. As Gum Baby said earlier, it be your own people.

The little doll gave me a gums-up (Arrrgh, now she had me making bad puns!) and I took a deep breath.

"You want this?" I shouted. I dangled the Story Box and pranced backward until I was on the top of the dune where I had left my bundle. "Do you? Well, come and get it!"

I took another step back and pretended to lose my balance. Brer grinned and dove forward. "Aha!" he shouted.

I pivoted and he tackled air, falling and rolling down the dune, coming to a stop right next to the creature I'd pulled from the hold of the Maafa.

"Gaaaaah!" he yelled, spitting sand out of his mouth. "I've had it with __"

I smiled when he came face-to-face with his mirror image.

That's right—it was a rabbit.

A skinny, soaked, unconscious bunny with matted fur.

We'd rescued Brer from the holds of the Maafa. The real Brer Rabbit.

Which meant the rabbit we'd all been talking to, the one who'd come up with the plans, the one we'd all trusted, was none other than— "Anansi!" Nyame shouted.

# 50
# REVEAL

**THE DISGUISED GOD YELPED AND** scrambled backward. He slipped on a piece of broken barrel and slid down the dune, landing on his fake rabbit tail in a tidal pool. He froze as the others gathered next to me, their expressions ranging from confused to disgusted to furious.

"What is the meaning of this?" Nyame demanded.

Ayanna shook her head. "How could you?"

"This whole time, you let us believe you were gone," Thandiwe spat. Her kierie was raised, and she looked seconds away from dashing down the slope to beat some honesty into the impostor below.

John Henry leaned on his hammer with his good arm. "We trusted you."

"And you played us like a new-string fiddle," High John said. "Sure you did."

"Now see here," the disguised Anansi began, getting up and dusting the sand off his furry disguise, "whatever that devious little scamp told you all —"

Nyame stepped forward again, and the words died.

The sky god looked like the sun on earth. Everything around him paled in comparison to his shining robes, and his golden stare threatened to melt Anansi into a puddle. Even John Henry watched him warily.

And Gum Baby rode on Nyame's head like a princess in a carriage, my adinkra bracelet dangling from her hand.

"You know," I said, "the last time I was here, the sky god made me a charm. An adinkra. If I remember right, he made it out of light and air."

"I fail to see how that is at all relevant," the trickster god muttered, but he didn't move.

"Oh, it's relevant, all right. See, that charm was special. What could it do again? Oh yeah. As long as I wore it, I could see through any illusions. Pretty useful, right?"

The impostor rolled his eyes, and I shook my head and continued. "You were there when the real Brer Rabbit was taken by iron monsters. *Before* I punched the Bottle Tree, I might add. So you can't pin all this on me."

He started to protest, but I talked right over him. "You and Brer were trying to figure out how to build a Story Box when the monsters came. They were attracted by the stories you had won from Nyame, and they captured Brer."

I stopped for a minute, imagining how that scene had gone down, with Anansi only looking out for his own butt. It made me even angrier.

"You stashed Nyame's broken Story Box in the Ridge for safekeeping," I went on. "But rather than warn everyone, and get them prepared, you hid in a bunny suit like a chump. Like a coward."

"Strange hearing that word from a boy who left his friend to die," the impostor snarled.

A week earlier, that comment would have sent me flying down the dune ready to fight. Even a day ago, maybe. But not anymore. Now those words rolled off me like drops of seawater. I smiled and shrugged, but my accusations were hard, punctuated by a jabbing finger.

"But then, when I created the tear between our worlds, you were stuck! Trapped! You needed a new plan, so you used the Warren to keep tabs on everyone. You sent us after the Story Box—the Story Box you had already drained—not to make things better, but because you still wanted its magic. You still thought you could fix it and everything else on your own."

I shook my head, disgusted by Anansi's selfishness. "You put us through all this to satisfy your greed, even though you knew it would only make things worse between Alkeans and Midfolk. You're already a god, but that wasn't enough for you. You also had to be the only storyteller. Isn't that the truth?"

Silence.

A hand dropped on my shoulder, and I ended my closing statement, balling my hands into fists. Nyame nodded at me, then turned to the sulking god below us. “Reveal,” he said to him.

One word.

The power in it slammed the impostor back into the sand. “What are you—?”

“Reveal.”

Suddenly I felt the urge to admit all my wrongdoings. The times I lied, the times I snuck candy home after school…That time I told Mom I was going on a run but instead I sat on a park bench and read the latest comic book releases.

And I wasn’t the only one.

“Gum Baby confesses!” The little loudmouth dropped from Nyame’s head and collapsed on the sand, pounding it with her fists. “Gum Baby was the one who ate the big biscuit! She knew it was John Henry’s, but it was fluffy and buttery and—”

“Enough!” Nyame said, and he turned back to the impostor, who wriggled furiously on the beach. “I will not say it again.”

“Clever boy.” The voice coming from the shivering, twitching body sounded distorted. Like someone talking with a stuffy nose. Or with their hand over their mouth. “Clever, clever boy. Tricking the trickster. Well done.”

Even with all my suspicions, and the guesses, and even the aid of the adinkra as Gum Baby handed the bracelet back to me, I wasn’t prepared for the tall, skinny, spindly-legged, deep-brown-skinned man who stepped out of the furry disguise he’d been wearing since the iron monsters first showed up. He wore pants that stopped high above the ankles and a cut-off T-shirt, and his bare toes wiggled in the sand. His eyes twinkled mischievously and he wore an infectious smile. A fickle breeze suddenly kicked up sand around us.

“So,” Anansi said, “now what?”

Turns out there are some pretty steep consequences for gods who don’t care for their people. Nyame had Kumi, the golden statue, march the Weaver back to the palace, where judgment would be delivered. The rest of us

escorted the sick and injured to the fairy forest, where we hoped the Mmoatia would agree to help them.

On the way, I learned that MidPass was a wreck. Miss Sarah—in between worried glances at Miss Rose, who was now being carried on a stretcher—told us that the iron monsters had wrecked the Thicket, and the Drowned Forest was a stinking, swampy mess. Well, even more stinky and swampy than usual, I guess.

"Folks left everything behind, just dropped it and ran to us when they heard your message to get to the Golden Crescent. We carried some of 'em here in a basket, and it was as scary a flight as I've ever seen. But I'd do it again if it came to that." She folded her wings around me in a giant feathery hug, and I tolerated it. "Ain't no telling what it's gon' be like when we get back to MidPass. But we'll get back there—"

Miss Rose opened an eye. "Because home is still home," she finished. Her partner shushed her, and Gum Baby and I left the two of them with the Mmoatia. Ayanna refused to stay in the sick bay, and she accompanied us, along with Thandiwe, to Nyame's palace.

"What do you think will happen to Anansi?" Ayanna asked.

Her hair was half braided, half curly afro, and I was tempted to touch it. Instead, I traced the stitching on Eddie's journal in my pocket. Its familiar weight was such a relief, I constantly patted it to make sure it was still there. "I don't know. How do you punish a god? *Hey, you, no dessert*?"

Thandiwe snorted. "Not likely. Make him work—that's what the elders would say."

We walked slowly, making sure Ayanna didn't overexert herself. I could still see some of the brands lining her skin, and the sight still made me angry. She caught me glancing at her for the hundredth time and swatted my arm.

"I'm fine, flyboy. Quit babying me."

"Who's a baby?" Gum Baby popped out of my Story Box backpack, where she'd made herself at home. She was in the middle of trying to do her hair so it matched Ayanna's. "Y'all talk too much. Hurry up! Gum Baby wants to see Nyame put his foot in Anansi's—"

"Hey, hey," I said. "Language."

"Don't shush me. Gum Baby was gonna say *web*! You always shushing somebody. Gum Baby ought to put her foot upside your big ole noggin."

She scrambled up and started jumping on my head. “See? How. You. Like. This?”

“I’m gonna take you back to the Mmoatia,” I warned.

She slid down to my shoulder, where she sat in a huff. “You always threatening people.”

We arrived at Nyame’s palace to see animated statues barring the giant doors. The leader squinted at me before stepping aside with a curt nod. I nodded back, and Ayanna raised her eyebrow.

“Careful now, your head can’t get much bigger.”

Gum Baby and Thandiwe snickered, and I couldn’t respond, because we were in the reception hall. Nyame and Anansi faced each other, the sky god on his throne and the Weaver standing in front of the dais, hands still in his pockets. Leopard swished his tail and Python hissed as we stepped inside, but they both kept their eyes locked on Anansi.

Nyame acknowledged us. “Good. Just in

time.” *Uh-oh.*

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “What does that mean?”

Ayanna sucked in a breath at my lack of godly respect, but me and the big sunny god were cool.

I hoped.

Nyame just pointed at Anansi. “I have determined a punishment befitting his disappointing behavior.”

“Not covering your mouth while sneezing is disappointing,” I said. “What he did seems a bit worse.”

“*He* is standing right here,” Anansi said with a sigh.

“And he can keep on standing while the adults talk,” I shot back. He still had the same snarky attitude as when he had impersonated Brer, and it didn’t irritate me any less.

Anansi just smiled, though.

“If you two are finished,” Nyame said in that weary tone your parents use when you and your siblings are arguing, “perhaps we could proceed? Anansi, Weaver of both tales and tricks, the punishments for your crimes are as follows:

“One, you will immediately cease your research into the stories of other worlds and turn over any and all results to me. Two, you will travel with young Tristan and follow his instructions to the letter to fix the tear in the sky.”

I grinned and Anansi groaned. That would be fun.

But Nyame didn't stop there.

"In addendum to Two, once the tear is fixed, you will accompany young Tristan into his world to assist in the completion of his story project—it having been so rudely interrupted by your efforts to steal stories from other realms—for a duration of no shorter than twenty days, as Tristan sees fit."

I choked on air in surprise. "He's staying with *me*?"

"I'm staying with *him*?" Then Anansi got a thoughtful look in his eye. "Actually, that could be—"

"I'm sorry," Nyame interrupted, and now it was his turn to get a gleam in his eye. "I was not finished. You will accompany young Tristan, but I am not fool enough to trust you any further. No, you will need…constraints."

Everyone stared in confusion as the sky god began to pull light from the ever-present sunrays beaming through the skylights and windows. He stirred in a piece of a nearby floating cloud, and then blew the glittering mixture toward Anansi. The spider god tried to duck, but the spell held him fast, and a golden whirlwind began to spin around him. Soon he was lost to view behind a funnel cloud of sunlight and magic.

"Tristan, the Story Box," Nyame commanded.

I shrugged off the treasure and handed it over. Nyame took it, dumped out a protesting Gum Baby, who'd climbed inside to take a nap, and then, before anyone could stop him, tossed the Story Box into the spinning cyclone.

"Wait!" Anansi called out. "Okay, look, I know I did a few things I shouldn't have—Ouch! That stings!—but we can work this out." His head poked from the cloud as he struggled to free himself, and Ayanna gasped. I tried not to recoil either.

His face blurred as it shifted between that of a dimpled, skinny man and that of a jeweled tarantula. Both faces pleaded with the sky god. "Seriously! Let me—Hey, my feet! Let me just make this right. I can—*Yowch!*—spin up a few—*Eeep!* It pinches—spells and have everything shipshape!"

His appeals fell on deaf ears, and Anansi turned to me as Nyame's spell pulled him back inside the funnel cloud. "Look, boy, we started off on the wrong foot. I've got eight of them! Easy to do. Look—Watch it! I can't replace those!—why don't I give you an even better scribble book?"

I crossed my arms and glared. Anansi continued to plead, even as he disappeared. Finally, after another few spins, the glittering sunlight blew

away, leaving nothing behind except

for— “Is that a cell phone?” I asked.

Nyame waved at it. “The spell decided how Anansi might best serve in his, ah, new role.” His golden eyes pinned me in place. “As an Anansesem carried the Story Box into the heart of evil, against my wishes…”

I started to explain, but he cut me off.

“…against my wishes—thereby saving us all—perhaps it is time for the Story Box to be carried by an Anansesem once more. Take it, Tristan, and let the stories of your world fill it. Use Anansi as you see fit. Remember, though—you are now responsible for his actions. You both will have to deal with whatever consequences result from this.”

I walked over and picked up the smartphone. It had a shiny black case, and on the back, a gold spider stretched all eight legs in the cardinal directions. I powered it on, and a spider crawled across the middle of the screen.

“This is humiliating,” the mini Anansi complained. His voice came out tinny, and I grinned. “I feel cooped up!”

“Good,” I said and slipped the phone into my back

pocket. “Doomed to exist in the dark, near a butt.

Great.” “Better than acting like a—”

“Boys,” Nyame said, pinching his brow, “go. Go away before I regret this. And, Tristan…” He inclined his golden-brown head. “Thank you. You have done more for Alke in a few days than many have done in years. You will always be welcome here. Just…next time, try not to bring any Bottle Tree friends with you, hmm?” He fixed me with an *Or else* stare and held it. “Now shoo. Safe travels.”

I blushed and muttered a good-bye, then hightailed it out of there.

Gum Baby scampered up and trotted alongside me as Ayanna, Thandiwe—with Chestnutt in her arms—and I exited the palace. “Gum Baby don’t envy you, Bumbletongue. Having to carry around something that small and annoying? Don’t seem fun at all.”

I patted her on the head. “I’m used to it by now.”

We walked back to the Mmoatia forest. Ayanna was limping pretty noticeably, so, to distract her, I practiced telling her the Maafa’s story. A promise was a promise, after all. When we reached the gates, we both stopped. Gum Baby looked between us, then scrambled up next to Chestnutt in Thandiwe’s arms. “Yeah…well…maybe your head isn’t as big

as Gum Baby thought it was. So…Gum Baby hates good-byes. Right, Chestnutt?"

The little bunny wiggled her ears. "Bye, Tristan! You have to come back so you can see my Warren Society initiation ceremony."

I gasped. "No way!"

"Yup, yup! They're gonna make me a full member as soon as MidPass is rebuilt."

I grinned. Good things happening to the best people (or bunnies, in this case) is the greatest feeling in the world.

Gum Baby gave an exaggerated sigh. "Enough with the sappy words, or Gum Baby's gonna start crying, and nobody wants that. C'mon, Ridgey, take us to go chase some fairies."

Thandiwe chuckled, then stepped forward and gave me the firmest handshake I'd ever gotten. "Farewell, Tristan. I will tell your story to the elders. And you will be admitted to Isihlangu with open arms at any time."

"Later, warrior girl," I said with a smile. "Or should I say, my princ—Ouch!" I rubbed my arm where she'd punched me, then waved as she and Chestnutt and Gum Baby took off into the leafy forest palace.

Ayanna fidgeted, and then, before I could say anything, hugged me tight. I hugged her back, and then she backed up. She looked down at the ground when she said, "You're all right."

I frowned. "That's it?"

"Yep. Well, no. Here's your hoodie. I…thank you."

I took the rumpled hoodie and raised an eyebrow. "That's it? That's all you want to say to me?"

She made a fist and shook it. "You need more excitement?"

"All right, all right." I tried to think of something to say, something cool to end the good-bye on, and then shrugged. Why not? "Gaaaaah."

A spluttering laugh escaped before Ayanna could stop it, and she rolled her eyes. "Bye, flyboy."

I grinned and watched as she limped off to get some rest, and then it was just me.

"That was cute."

Oh. Right.

It wasn't just me.

"Shut up, phone," I muttered and headed to the marina.

Gods. So freaking annoying.

# 51
# GOOD-BYES AND NEW LIVES

**JOHN HENRY AND HIGH JOHN** waited for me by the beach. John Henry had his overalls rolled up around his knees as he stood in the water, hammering away at a bridge fashioned from the wreckage of fancy yachts. High John stood watching him, crunching noisily on an apple. The two of them together looked like uncles shooting the breeze at a family reunion. John Henry was all work, focused and determined, while High John…well, there was no defining him.

"Make sure you fasten them planks real secure-like, hear me?" said High John. "Last thing we need is someone falling in on the way home. Oh, hi, Tristan." He put his half-eaten apple in his pocket. "Done with Mr. High-and-Mighty up there?"

I glanced back at Nyame's palace high up the curving city streets. "Yeah, I guess so."

High John muttered something and John Henry frowned. "Now then, ain't no need for that sorta language. Not in front of the boy!"

"What are you doing?" I asked John Henry, walking up to the waterline.

"Ole Hammer Head decided to build a bridge from MidPass to Alke," High John said with a drawl. "Figures he can bring us all together real cozy-like, sure he does."

John Henry scratched his jaw and sighed. "It's gonna take some time for MidPass to get itself right again. What with Brer—the *real* Brer—being out

of sorts. Old Nyame said we could hang out here in the meantime. Don't know if this bridge will do any good bringing Alkeans and Midfolk together, but I reckon it's a start."

High John grunted, then looked at me. "Well? What sort of light reprimand did our friendly spider god get? A time-out and a stern talking-to?"

I pulled out the Anansi phone and explained Nyame's punishment. John Henry whistled, and even High John looked impressed as he said, "He's trapped in there? Hmph. Well, maybe that Nyame fella's got a bit more in him than I thought. Though how's that little thing supposed to help you fix the tear? And if Anansi's in there, how's he supposed to get you up in the sky?"

I paused, my mouth frozen mid-answer. "That's…a good question." John Henry chuckled as he returned to his hammering.

High John shook his head. "I knew it. Them Alkeans can't button their pants without ten sets of instructions. Of course they leave it to us to figure out the hard parts."

He whistled, and Old Familiar cawed and flapped down out of the air. The shadow crow messed with my hood, and I rubbed his beak before climbing aboard.

John Henry raised an eyebrow. "I see you got over your fear of heights." Oh. Right.

The crow actually planned to fly.

I wobbled on my feet and swallowed several times. "Actually, I didn't, but thanks for reminding me. I'm just gonna…close my eyes."

John Henry's laugh created waves in every direction as he grabbed at his belly. He wiped a tear from his eye and waded over to hold out a giant hand. "Boy, I swear, I'm gonna miss your jokes. You be safe, now, you hear?"

I shook his hand, winced as he nearly crushed it, then grinned. "When I come back, I'll bring you some Ali posters. And Sugar Ray Leonard, too!"

"I'm looking forward to it."

He stepped back, and High John leaped aboard. Old Familiar cawed twice, and then we took off, flapping in a giant, gusty circle as we built up speed and climbed higher and higher.

As Alke receded below me, I studied it. The Golden Crescent glistened like a jewel, and behind it the Ridge stood tall, a wall protecting a treasure.

Beyond the mountains, green hills and brown deserts and blue lakes came together in a mosaic of beauty. I could hear Alke calling to me, singing the song that connected the land to its people.

"Catch you later," I whispered.

Outside the protective embrace of the bay, the Burning Sea flickered like dim coals. I didn't see any bone ships. Had they gone down with the Maafa, too?

A misty landmass rose out the sea as we flapped higher. MidPass, most of it hidden beneath fog as thick as thunderclouds. I vowed to return to it someday, if only to see it restored to the home my friends needed it to be.

"Don't fix your face too grumpy," High John called, as if he could read my mind. Shoot, he was a god—he probably could. He smiled and turned to consider MidPass, too. "You'll see it again. It'll be right as rain, sure it will."

We climbed higher still, and soon the roar of the burning rip in the sky filled my ears. It sounded like waves crashing against cliffs, like eight semi-trucks driving past at the same time, like a giant rush of wind that kept blowing and blowing.

"Hold tight now!" High John shouted.

I shielded my eyes as Old Familiar shot up through the bloodred flames. Heat pressed against every inch of my skin—a dry blast so hot that my sweat evaporated before it made it out, and yet the shadow crow made it with little effort. Helps when you have feathers made of darkness. We dodged flares and twirled between burning cinders, and still it grew hotter and hotter, until I thought this was a huge mistake, I couldn't take it anymore, we'd melt before—

"We're here!" cried High John.

We popped out like a cork, shooting high into the treetops of a familiar landscape. The cool air rushed against my face as we arced above the branches, and the forest smelled like rain on freshly dug earth. It was nighttime, and save for the stars above, the burning hole in the ground near the Bottle Tree was the only light for miles.

Old Familiar landed twenty feet away in the clearing, and I hopped off. High John took a look around, impressed. "This your home, kid?"

I grinned. "You got that right. Alabama—you in Strong country now."

High John doffed an imaginary hat and smiled right back. "Well, look whose britches decided to grow. My pardon, Mr. Strong."

“If you two are quite finished, can we get this ridiculous ordeal over with?” Anansi’s tiny voice interrupted, full of impatience. “Some of us have work to do, and it doesn’t involve blathering about like bumpkins.”

High John eyed the phone as I pulled it out. “Bet my ax can cut that in half.” He climbed back onto Old Familiar and tossed me a casual wave. “Let me know if you need me to do that, you hear?”

“I will,” I called back.

“And don’t be a stranger! Them folks back home ain’t nearly as fun as you. Betcha we can stir up a right amount of trouble, sure we can!” He waved again, and Old Familiar shot into the air before tucking his wings tight and diving into the hole.

And just like that, I was—

“Finally,” Anansi grumbled. “Let’s get this finished.”

I sighed. He killed my buzz every time. But before I snapped back, a thought occurred to me. “What day is it? Brer—you—said that there was some time effect between Alke and this world.”

“Yes, yes,” the spider god said impatiently. “Time dilation. When the balance is disturbed—like when there’s a burning hole between realms—there’s no way to control the passage of time. Not that I expect you to understand that. Basically, the tear created a skipping effect, where a minute here is nearly three days there. Your High John and his feathered friend will return to find that nearly a week has passed.”

I checked the phone. Sure enough, it was the same night I’d left.

“I know it’s a complex topic, and I’ll be sure to go over painstaking details at a later time, after we clean up the mess you made, but right now…”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. What do I do?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see the blasted thing. This is your infernal creation. Figure it out!”

I held up the phone and studied it. The screen flickered on, and Anansi sat in his human form, leaning against the edge. Several app icons flickered into view above his head, and I raised an eyebrow as I recited their names.

“Anansi Tales, Web Search—ha, ’cause you’re a spider—Alke Maps, Listen Chile, Tristan-Don’t-Press-This-Unless-You-Are-Really-Bored…” My finger hovered over that one for a second, until I spotted one more in the top right corner. “Oh, what’s this? SpiderCam?”

I tapped the icon, and the phone's camera filled the screen. Anansi yelped in surprise as the burning hole appeared near where he sat. He got up, intrigued. He walked around the screen, studying the tear as I aimed the phone's camera lens around the clearing.

"Hold it," he commanded. "Point your projection spell right here again."

"It's a camera," I muttered.

"Point the camera spell right here, then. Yes. Hmm. I wonder…" He walked to the tear and pulled a silver thread out of nowhere. His hands moved in a blur, and the bottom corner of the burning gash closed.

"Whoa." I gasped. I moved the phone to see the ground with my own eyes, and sure enough, the hole had gotten smaller. "What is that stuff? That's amazing."

"Kindly keep the camera spell still," Anansi snapped, "and it's god silk, not that I expect *you* to know about such things." He went back to work, and I watched the ground, rather than the phone, as near-invisible thread pulled the hole's edges together tight with a puff of smoke. Before I could think of something slick to say in response, the tear was gone. A puckered dirt mound was the only evidence of the portal between realms.

"There, all done."

I walked around the Bottle Tree forest, amazed despite Anansi's smug tone. Say what you will about his attitude, the spider god had skills. All that trouble. All the violence, the fear, the pain. If only Anansi had…

A breeze rustled the trees, and the bottles on the branches clinked together. I frowned at the branch that had once held the large blue bottle. Cotton's bottle. The broken shards still lay on the ground, and the thought of him coming back to terrorize me sent a shiver down my back. I'd have to replace that bottle, and fast. Maybe Nana had some more.

The wind whistled gently, sounding pleased.

"Well, come along, boy, escort me through this rustic wonderland of yours." Despite the words, Anansi sounded peeved. "Twenty days can't end soon enough."

I thought about that as I started to walk back through the forest. This time the trees almost seemed to part before me, like they were being respectful. But that was silly. Right?

"Actually, that's not exactly accurate," I said.

Suspicion filled Anansi's voice. "And just what is that supposed to mean? You heard the sky god just like I did. He said—"

"He said," I interrupted happily, "'a duration no *shorter* than twenty days…*as Tristan sees fit*.'" I emphasized that last bit as we stepped onto the dirt road leading back to Granddad and Nana's house.

Anansi went silent.

Then:

"That no-good, sneaky, shiny-foreheaded, brass-eyed—"

I laughed as Anansi continued to fume all the way down the path. The edge of the sky began to lighten as morning crept up on the Strong family farm, just enough to do a bit of reading. Something Nyame said back when he'd confined the still-complaining trickster god. *Let the stories of your world fill it once more*, he'd said. Well, I knew just where to start.

I pulled out Eddie's journal. It was wrinkled and battered and just as valuable as the magic phone I held next to it. I opened the Listen Chile app and grinned when a button labeled RECORD appeared. I pressed it and cleared my throat, then opened the first page in the journal.

*"Once, the people had no stories…."*

So there you have it. The tale of the tape. The story of how I went twelve rounds with an evil spirit and won. Stop the fight, ref, he don't want it with me.

I'd continue the analogy, but truthfully, I had a lot of people (and gods and creatures and one annoying doll thing) in my corner. I didn't do it alone. And if the adinkra bracelet tingling on my wrist was to be trusted, I'd need my people in my corner again real soon. But it's cool. I'm ready. I can go another twelve rounds.

'Cause at the end of the fight?

I'll still be standing.

Still punching.

Still Strong.

*My name is Tristan Strong, and I've got a story to tell.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It takes a village to raise a child, and a book is no different. Tristan's story would not have been told if it weren't for a bunch of people in my corner.

Thank you to all those who came before me, who paved the way for me to write and tell stories, who guided my hands, who lifted and shielded me, my own forebears. To the Nanas and the Granddads. To the nameless and missing. To the taken and stolen. To the stories that came from them and came with them.

To my mother, Doreatha Mbalia, my first critique partner and biggest fan.

To Cake Literary (Dhonielle and Sona, especially) and Disney Hyperion (Steph!), who offered me an opportunity to bring the stories of my childhood to life.

To the staff: the copy editors, the designers, the publicists, the marketing and sales teams, the assistants, and everyone else involved in bringing books to the masses, who often go unappreciated and unrecognized.

To Rick Riordan, whose books redefined the way mythology and folklore could be told.

To the many writing groups I've joined, whose encouragement pushed me through times of uncertainty and self-doubt. The Slack groups, the Discord groups, the retreat groups—you all pulled me forward.

To the chat groups whose advice I repeat to everyone who will listen, and to the chat groups whose comments I will deny ever having read.

To my friends and family, whose love and support give me energy.

To my first beta readers: my daughters.

To my wife, Mallory, whom I do not deserve.

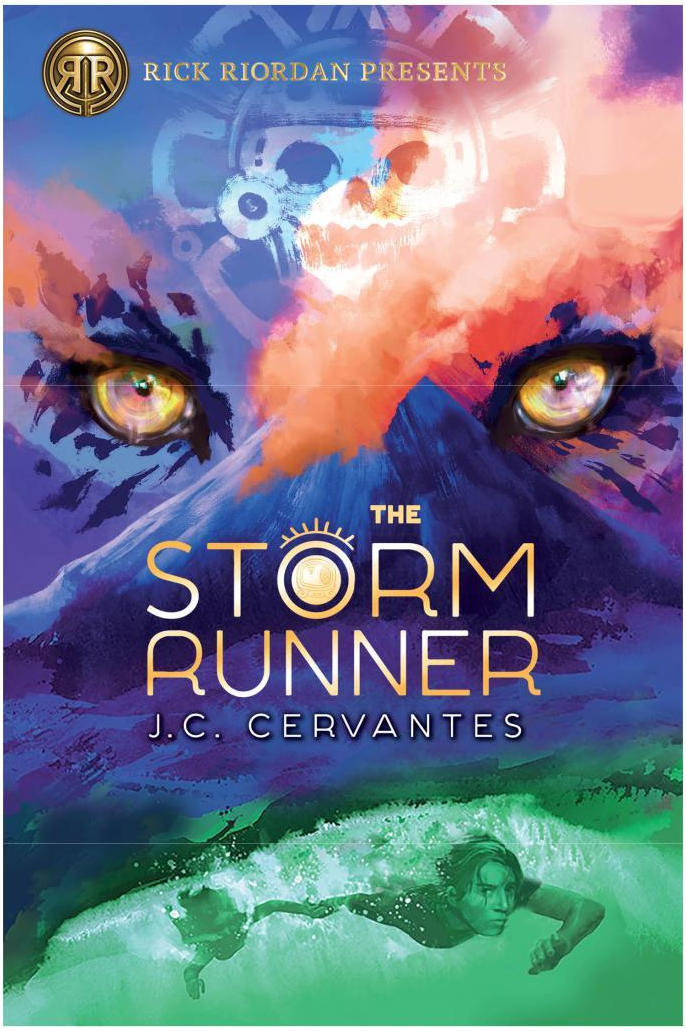
And to my father, Ahmed Mbalia, who we called Baba, who passed several months before I started writing this book, and yet whose words still ring in my ear to this day.

**KWAME MBALIA** is a part-time pharmaceutical calibration tech, part-time writer, and full-time dad. *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* is his debut novel. He lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is working on another book about these characters. Follow him on Twitter @KSekouM.

**RICK RIORDAN**, dubbed “storyteller of the gods” by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series, including Percy Jackson and the Olympians, which brings Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures. The goal of Rick Riordan Presents is to publish highly entertaining books by authors from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to allow them to tell their own stories inspired by the mythology, folklore, and culture of their heritage. Rick’s Twitter handle is @camphalfblood.

**Keep reading for a sneak peek at *The Storm Runner* by J.C. Cervantes!**

# TAP TO BUY



# 1

**It all started when** Mom screamed.

I thought she'd seen a scorpion, but when I got to the kitchen, she was waving a letter over her head and dancing in circles barefoot. After a year of being homeschooled, I was going to get to go to school again. Did you catch that word? *Get*. As in, someone was *allowing* me to learn. Stupid! Who put adults in charge, anyway? But here's the thing: I didn't want to go to some stuffy private school called Holy Ghost where nuns gave me the evil eye. And I for sure didn't want the Holy Ghost "shuttle" to come all the way out to no-man's-land to pick me up. Mine was the last stop, and that meant the van would probably be full when it arrived. And *full* meant at least a dozen eyes staring at me.

I smiled at Mom, because she looked happy. She took care of sick people in their homes all day, and she also let her brother, Hondo, live with us. He spent most of his time watching wrestling matches on TV and eating bags of Flamin' Hot Cheetos, so she didn't wear smiles too often.

"But…" I didn't know where to start. "You said I could be homeschooled."

"For a year," she said, still beaming. "That was the agreement. Remember? A single year." Pretty sure that *wasn't* the agreement, but once something was in Mom's head, it was superglued there. Arguing was useless. Plus, I wanted her to be happy. Really, really happy. So I nodded hard and fast, because the harder I nodded, the more excited I'd look. I even threw in another smile.

"When?" It was September, and that meant I'd already missed a month of classes.

"You start tomorrow."

*Crap!*

"How about I start in January?" Yeah, you could say I was super optimistic. Mom shook her head. "This is an incredible opportunity, Zane." "Doesn't private school cost a lot?"

"They gave you a scholarship. Look!" She flashed the letter as proof.

*Oh.*

Mom folded the letter neatly. "You've been on the waiting list since…"

She didn't finish her sentence, but she didn't need to. *Since* referred to the day this jerk —a jerk whose face was seared into my brain—had mopped the floor with me at my old school, and I'd sworn never to set foot in any "place of learning" again.

"What about Ms. Cab?" I asked. "She needs my help. How am I going to pay for Rosie's food if I don't work?"

My neighbor, Ms. Cab (her real last name is Caballero, but I couldn't pronounce it as a little kid and the nickname stuck), was blind and needed an assistant to help her do stuff around the house. Also, she worked as a phone psychic, and I answered the calls before she came on the line. It made her seem more legit. She paid me pretty good, enough to feed my dog, Rosie. Rosie was a boxmatian (half-boxer, half-dalmatian) and ate like an elephant.

"You can work in the afternoons." Mom took my hand in hers.

I hated when she did that during our arguments.

“Zane, honey, please. Things will be mejor this time. You’re thirteen now. You need friends. You can’t live out here alone with these…”

*Out here* was a narrow, dusty road in the New Mexico desert. Other than my two neighbors, there were tumbleweeds, rattlesnakes, coyotes, roadrunners, a dried-up riverbed, and even a dead volcano. But more on that later. Most people are surprised when they find out New Mexico has so many volcanoes. (Of course, *mine* was no ordinary act of nature, right, gods?)

“With these what?” I asked, even though I knew what she was thinking: *misfits*.

So what that Ms. Cab was a little different? And who cared that my other neighbor, Mr. Ortiz, grew weird varieties of chile peppers in his greenhouse? Didn’t mean they were misfits.

“I’m just saying that you need to be with kids your age.”

“But I don’t like kids my age,” I told her. “And I learn more without teachers.”

She couldn’t argue with that. I’d taught myself all sorts of things, like the generals of the Civil War, the number of blood vessels in the human body, and the names of stars and planets. That was the best thing about not going to school: I was the boss.

Mom ruffled my dark hair and sighed. “You’re a genius, yes, but I don’t like you hanging out only with a bunch of old people.”

“Two isn’t a bunch.”

I guess I’d sort of been hoping Mom would forget our deal. Or maybe Holy Ghost (who named that school, anyway?) would disappear off the face of the earth in a freak cataclysmic accident.

“Mom.” I got real serious and made her look me in the eyes. “No one wants to be friends with a freak.” I tapped my cane on the ground twice. One of my legs was shorter than the other, which meant I walked with a dumb limp. It earned me all sorts of nicknames from the other kids: Sir Limps-a-Lot, McGimpster, Zane the Cane, and my all-time favorite: Uno—for the one good leg.

“You are *not* a freak, Zane, and…”

Oh boy. Her eyes got all watery like they were going to drown in her sadness.

“Okay, I’ll go,” I said, because I’d rather face a hundred hateful eyes than two crying ones.

She straightened, wiped her tears away with the back of her hand, and said, “Your uniform is pressed and waiting on your bed. Oh, and I have a present for you.”

Notice how she dropped the bad news with something good? She should’ve run for mayor. There was no point in my griping about the uniform, even though the tie would probably give my neck a rash. Instead I decided to focus on the word *present*, and I held my breath, hoping it wasn’t a rosary or something. Mom went to a cabinet and pulled out a skinny umbrella-size box with a silver ribbon tied around it.

“What is it?”

“Just open it.” Her hands twitched with excitement.

I ripped open the box to get to the present that we didn’t have money for. Inside was a wad of brown paper and under that, a shiny black wooden cane. It had a brass tip shaped like a dragon’s head. “This is…” I blinked, searching for the right word.

“Do you like it?” Her smile could’ve lit up the whole world.

I turned the cane in my hands, testing its weight, and decided it looked like something a warrior would carry, which made it the coolest gift in the universe. “I bet it cost a lot.”

Mom shook her head. “It was given to me….Mr. Chang died last week, remember?”

Mr. Chang was a rich client who lived in a grande house in town and sent Mom home with chow mein every Tuesday. He was also a customer of Ms. Cab’s—she was the one who’d gotten Mom the job to take care of him until he died. I hated to think of Mom hanging out with dying people, but as she always said, we had to eat. I’d tried eating less, but that was getting harder and harder the older I got. I’d already reached a whopping five foot nine. That made me the tallest in my family.

I ran my hands over the brass dragon head with the flames flying out of its mouth.

“He collected all sorts of things,” Mom continued. “And his daughter said I should have this. She knew you—” She stopped herself. “She said the dragon symbolizes protection.”

So Mom thought I needed protection. That made me feel pretty miserable. But I knew she meant well.

I rested my weight against it. It felt perfect, like it was made for me. I was excited to cruise around with this much cooler cane instead of my dumb plain brown one that screamed *I'm a freak.* "Thanks, Mom. I really like it."

"I thought it would make going back to school… easier," Mom said.

Right. Easier. Nothing, not even this warrior dragon cane, was going to make my being the new kid any easier.

It was a low point, and I didn't think things could get any worse. But boy, was I wrong.

That night, as I lay in bed, I thought about the next day. My stomach was all twisted in knots, and I wished I could turn into primordial ooze and seep into the ground. Rosie knew something was up, because she let out little groans and nuzzled her head against my hand, soft-like. I petted the white patch between her eyes in small circles.

"I know, girl," I whispered. "But Mom looked so happy."

I wondered what my dad would say about the whole thing. Not that I'd ever know—I'd never even met the guy. He and Mom hadn't gotten married, and he'd bounced before I was born. She'd only told me three things about him: He was superbly handsome (her words, not mine). He was from Mexico's Yucatán region. (She'd spent time there before I was born and said the sea is like glass.) And the third thing? She loved him to pieces. Whatever.

It was all quiet, except for the crickets and my guts churning. I clicked on the lamp and sat up.

On my nightstand was the Maya mythology book Mom had given me for my eighth birthday. It was part of a five-volume set about Mexico, but this book was the coolest. I figured it was her way of showing me my dad's culture without having to talk about him. The book had a tattered green cover with big gold letters on it: *The Myths and Magic of the Maya*. It was filled with color illustrations and stories about the adventures of different gods, kings, and heroes. The gods sounded awesome, but authors lie all the time.

I opened the book. On the endpapers was an illustration of a Maya death mask made of crumbling jade, with squinted lidless eyes and square stone teeth like tiny gravestones.

I swear the face was smiling at me.

"What're you looking at?" I huffed, slamming the book closed.

I tossed off the covers, got up, and peered out the window. It was all shadows and silence. There was only one good thing about living on the mesa: it was a hundred yards from a dead volcano (aka the Beast).

Having my own volcano was about the most interesting thing in my short life. (Up until that point, that is.) I'd even found a secret entrance into it last month. Rosie and I were hiking down from the top, and about halfway down I heard a strangled gasp. Naturally, I went to investigate, half expecting to find a hurt animal. But when I parted the scraggly creosote branches, I discovered something else: an opening just big enough to crawl through. It led to a whole labyrinth of caves, and for half a second I'd thought about calling *National Geographic* or something. But then I'd decided I would rather have a private place for Rosie and me than be on the cover of some dumb magazine.

Rosie leaped off the bed when she saw me slip on my sneakers.

"Come on, girl. Let's get out of here."

I went outside with my new warrior cane and limped past Nana's grave (she died when I was two, so I didn't remember her). I crossed the big stretch of desert, zigzagging between creosote, ocotillo, and yucca. The moon looked like a huge fish eye.

"Maybe I could just *pretend* to go to school," I said to Rosie as we got closer to the Beast, a black cone rising a couple hundred yards out of the sand to meet the sky.

Rosie stopped, sniffed the air. Her ears pricked.

"Okay, fine. Bad idea. You have a better one?"

With a whimper, Rosie inched back.

"You smell something?" I said, hoping it wasn't a rattlesnake. I hated snakes. When I didn't hear the familiar rattling, I relaxed. "You're not afraid of another jackrabbit, are you?"

Rosie yelped at me.

"You *were* afraid, don't try to deny it."

She took off toward the volcano. "Hey!" I called, trying to keep up. "Wait for me!"

I'd found Rosie wandering the desert four years ago. At the time, I figured someone had dumped her there. She was all skin and bones, and she acted skittish at first, like someone had abused her. When I begged Mom to let me keep her, she said we couldn't afford it, so I promised to earn money for dog food. Rosie was cinnamon brown like most boxers, but she had black spots all over, including on her floppy ears, which is why I was sure she had dalmatian in her, too. She only had three legs, so she got me and I got her.

When we got to the base of my volcano, I stopped abruptly. There, in the moonlit sand, was a series of paw prints—massive, with long claws. I stepped into one of the impressions and my size-twelve foot took up only a third of the space. The paw was definitely too big to belong to a coyote. I thought maybe they were bear tracks, except bears don't cruise the desert.

I kneeled to investigate. Even without the moonlight I would've been able to see the huge prints, because I had perfect eyesight in the dark. Mom called it a sacred ancestral blessing. Whatever. I called it another freak-of-nature thing.

"They look big enough to belong to a dinosaur, Rosie."

She sniffed one, then another, and whimpered.

I followed the trail, but it ended suddenly, like whatever creature the prints belonged to had simply vanished. Shivers crept up my spine.

Rosie whimpered again, looking up at me with her soft brown eyes as if to say *Let's get outta here.*

"Okay, okay," I said, just as eager as she was to get to the top of the volcano.

We climbed the switchback trail, past my secret cave (which I'd camouflaged with a net of creosote and mesquite branches), toward the ridge.

When we got to the top, I took in the jaw-dropping view. To the east was a glittering night sky rolling over the desert, and to the west was a lush valley dividing the city and the flat mesa. And beyond that? A looming mountain range with jagged peaks that stood shoulder to shoulder like a band of soldiers.

This was pretty much my favorite place in the world. Not that I'd ever been outside New Mexico, but I read a lot. Mom always told me the volcano was unsafe, without ever really saying why, but to me it had always felt quiet and calm. It also happened to be where I trained. After the docs had said there was no way to fix my bum leg, I spent hours hiking the Beast, thinking if I could just make my shorter leg stronger, maybe my limp would be less noticeable.

No such luck. But by walking the rim's edge I learned how to be a boss at balancing, and that's a handy skill when you get shoved around by kids at school.

I set down my cane and began teetering along the rim of the crater while holding my arms out to my sides. Mom would kill me if she knew I did this. One slip and I'd tumble fifty feet down the rocky hill.

Rosie cruised behind me, sniffing the ground.

"How 'bout I pretend to be sick?" I said, still stuck on how to get out of Holy Ghost school. "Or I could release rats into the cafeteria….There can't be school if there's no food, right?" Did Catholic schools even have a cafeteria? The only problem was, my ideas would only buy me a day or two.

A low rumble rolled across the sky.

Rosie and I both stopped in our tracks and looked up. A small aircraft zoomed over the Beast, turned, and came back.

I stepped away from the crater's edge, craning my neck to get a better look.

I waved, hoping the pilot could see me. But he didn't come near enough. Instead, he started zigzagging like a crazy person. I thought maybe he was borracho until he circled back perfectly for another run. This time he came in tighter. Just when I thought the pilot was going to pull up, he pointed the plane's nose toward the center of the crater. The wings were so close to me I could practically see the screws holding them together. The plane's thrust shook the ground, sending me stumbling, but I caught myself.

Then something started glowing inside the cockpit. An eerie yellowish-blue light. Except what I saw had to have been some kind of a hallucination or optical illusion, because there was no pilot— there was a *thing*. An alien head thing with red bulging eyes, no nose, and a mouth filled with long sharp fangs. Yeah, that's right. An alien demon dude was flying the plane right into the Beast's mouth! Everything happened in sickeningly slow motion. I heard a crash, and a fiery explosion rocked the world, big enough to make even the planets shake.

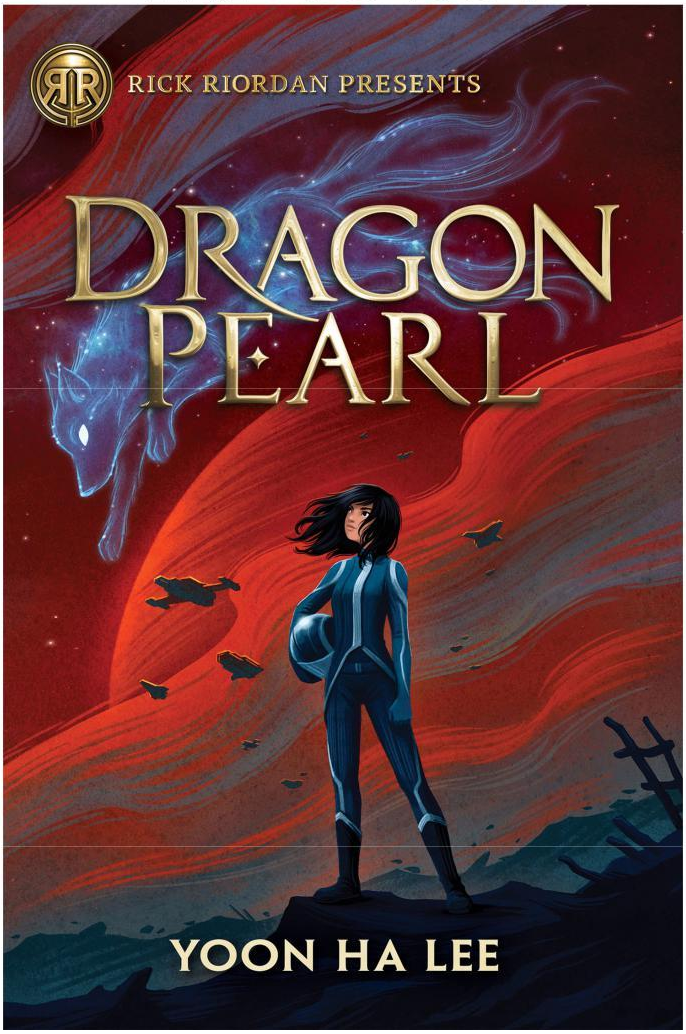
I did a drop roll as flames burst from the top of the volcano. Rosie yelped.

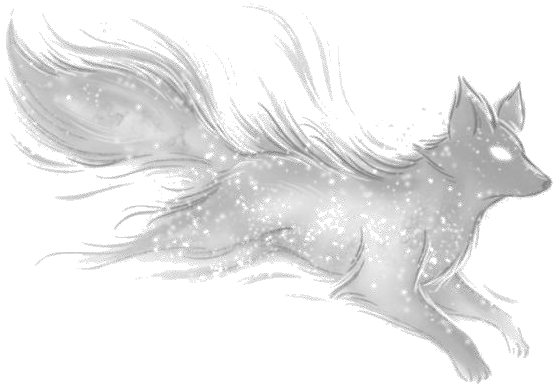
"Rosie!"

And before I knew it I was tumbling down, down, down away from the Beast, away from my dog, and away from life as I knew it.

**Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Dragon Pearl* by Yoon Ha Lee!**

TAP TO BUY





# ONE

I almost missed the stranger's visit that morning.

I liked to sleep in, though I didn't get to do it often. Waking up meant waking early. Even on the days I had lessons, my mom and aunties loaded me down with chores to do first. Scrubbing the hydroponics units next to our dome house. Scrounging breakfast from our few sad vegetables and making sure they were seasoned well enough to satisfy my four aunties. Ensuring that the air filters weren't clogged with the dust that got into everything.

I had a pretty dismal life on Jinju. I was counting the days until I turned fifteen. Just two more years left before I could take the entrance exams for the Thousand Worlds Space Forces and follow my brother, Jun, into the service. That was all that kept me going.

The day the stranger came, though—that day was different.

I was curled under my threadbare blanket, stubbornly clinging to sleep even though light had begun to steal in through the windows. Then my oldest cousin Bora's snoring got too loud to ignore. I often wished I had a room of my own, instead of sharing one with three cousins. Especially since Bora snored like a dragon. I kicked her in the side. She grunted but didn't stir.

We all slept on the same shabby quilt, handed down from my ancestors, some of the planet's first settlers. The embroidery had once depicted magpies and flowers, good-luck symbols. Most of the threads had come loose over the years, rendering the pictures illegible. When I was younger, I'd asked my mom why she didn't use Charm to restore it. She'd given me a stern look, then explained that she'd have to redo it every day as the magic wore off—objects weren't as susceptible to Charm as people were. I'd shut up fast, because I didn't want her to add that chore to my daily roster. Fortunately, my mom disapproved of Charm in general, so it hadn't gone any further.

All my life I'd been cautioned not to show off the fox magic that was our heritage. We lived disguised as humans and rarely used our abilities to shape-shift or Charm people. Mom insisted that we behave as proper, civilized gumiho so we wouldn't get in trouble with our fellow steaders, planet-

bound residents of Jinju. In the old days, foxes had played tricks like changing into beautiful humans to lure lonely travelers close so they could suck out their lives. But our family didn't do that.

The lasting prejudice against us annoyed me. Other supernaturals, like dragons and goblins and shamans, could wield their magic openly, and were even praised for it. Dragons used their weather magic for agriculture and the time-consuming work of terraforming planets. Goblins, with their invisibility caps, could act as secret agents; their ability to summon food with their magical wands came in handy, too. Shamans were essential for communicating with the ancestors and spirits, of course. We foxes, though—we had never overcome our bad reputation. At least most people thought we were extinct nowadays.

I didn't see what the big deal was about using our powers around the house. We rarely had company—few travelers came to the world of Jinju. According to legend, about two hundred years ago, a shaman was supposed to have finished terraforming our planet with the Dragon Pearl, a mystical orb with the ability to create life. But on the way here, both she and the Pearl had disappeared. I didn't know if anything in that story was true or not. All I knew was that Jinju had remained poor and neglected by the Dragon Council for generations.

As I reluctantly let go of sleep that morning, I heard the voice of a stranger in the other room. At first I thought one of the adults was watching a holo show—maybe galactic news from the Pearled Halls—and had the volume turned up too high. We were always getting reports about raids from the Jeweled Worlds and the Space Forces' heroic efforts to defend us from the marauders, even if Jinju was too far from the border to suffer such attacks. But the sound from our holo unit always came out staticky. No static accompanied this voice.

It didn't belong to any of the neighbors, either. I knew everyone who lived within an hour's scooter ride. And it wasn't just the unfamiliarity of the voice, deep and smooth, that made me sit up and take notice. No one in our community spoke that formally.

Were we in trouble with the authorities? Had someone discovered that fox spirits weren't a myth after all? The stranger's voice triggered my old childhood fears of our getting caught.

"You must be misinformed." That was Mom talking. She sounded tense.

Now I really started to worry.

". . . no mistake," the voice was saying.

No mistake what? I had to find out more.

I slipped out from under the blanket, freezing in place when Bora grunted and flopped over. I bet starship engines made less racket. But if the stranger had heard Bora's obnoxious noises, he gave no sign of it.

I risked a touch of Charm to make myself plainer, drabber, harder to see. Foxes can smell each other's magic—one of my aunties described the sensation as being like a sneeze that won't come out —but my mom might be distracted enough not to notice.

"How is this possible?" I heard Mom ask.

My hackles rose. She was clearly distressed, and I'd never known her to show weakness in front of strangers.

I tiptoed out of the bedroom and poked my head around the corner. There stood Mom, small but straight-backed. And then came the second surprise. I bit down on a sneeze.

Mom was using Charm. Not a lot—just enough to cover the patches in her trousers and the wrinkles in her worn shirt, and to restore their color to a richer green. We hadn't expected visitors, especially anybody important. She wouldn't have had time to dress up in the fine clothes she saved for special occasions. It figured she'd made an exception for herself to use fox magic, despite the fact that she chastised me whenever I experimented with it.

The stranger loomed over her. I didn't smell any Charm on him, but he could have been some other kind of supernatural, like a tiger or a goblin, in disguise. It was often hard to tell. I sniffed more closely, hoping to catch a whiff of emotion. Was he angry? Frustrated? Did he detect Mom's magic at all? But he held himself under such tight control that I couldn't get a bead on him.

His clothes, finely tailored in a burnished-bronze-colored fabric, were all real. What caught my eye was the badge on the breast of his coat. It marked him as an official investigator of the Thousand Worlds, the league to which Jinju belonged. There weren't literally a thousand planets in the league, but it encompassed many star systems, all answering to the same government. I'd never been off-world myself, although I'd often dreamed of it. This man might have visited dozens of worlds for his job, even the government seat at the Pearled Halls, and I envied him for it.

More to the point, what was an investigator doing here? I could only think of one thing: Something had happened to my brother, Jun. My heart thumped so loudly I was sure he and Mom would hear it.

"Your son vanished under mysterious circumstances," the investigator said. "He is under suspicion of desertion."

I gasped involuntarily. Jun? Deserting?

"That's impossible!" Mom said vehemently. "My son worked very hard to get into the Space Forces!" I didn't need my nose to tell me how freaked-out she was.

I remembered the way Jun's face had lit up when he'd gotten the letter admitting him to the Academy. It had meant everything to him—he would never run off! I bit the side of my mouth to keep from blurting that out.

The investigator's eyes narrowed. "That may be, but people change, especially when they are presented with certain . . . *opportunities*."

"Opportunities . . . ?" Mom swallowed and then asked in a small voice, "What do you mean?"

"According to his captain's report, your son left to go in search of the Dragon Pearl."

I wasn't sure which stunned me more: the idea of Jun leaving the Space Forces, or the fact that the Dragon Pearl might actually exist.

"The Pearl? How . . . ?" my mother asked incredulously. "No one knows where it—"

"The Dragon Council has made strides in locating it," the investigator said, rudely cutting her off. "And they would pay handsomely to have it back in their possession. If he found it, your son could have found the temptation irresistible. . . ."

No. I knew my brother wouldn't risk his career by trying to cash in an artifact, even one as renowned as the Dragon Pearl.

Mom's shoulders slumped. I wanted to tell her not to believe the investigator so readily. There had to be some other explanation.

"Jun is not here," she said, drawing herself up again, "and we have not heard from him, either. I'm afraid we can't help you."

The man was not put off. "There *is* one matter you can assist us with," he said. "Your son's last report before he left—it included a message addressed to Min. I believe that's your daughter?"

A shock went through me when he said my name.

"I have been sent here to show it to her. It may offer clues to Jun's location—or the Pearl's. Perhaps he wrote it in a code language only she would understand."

"Again, I think you have the wrong impression of my son," Mom said haughtily. "He is an honorable soldier, not a traitor."

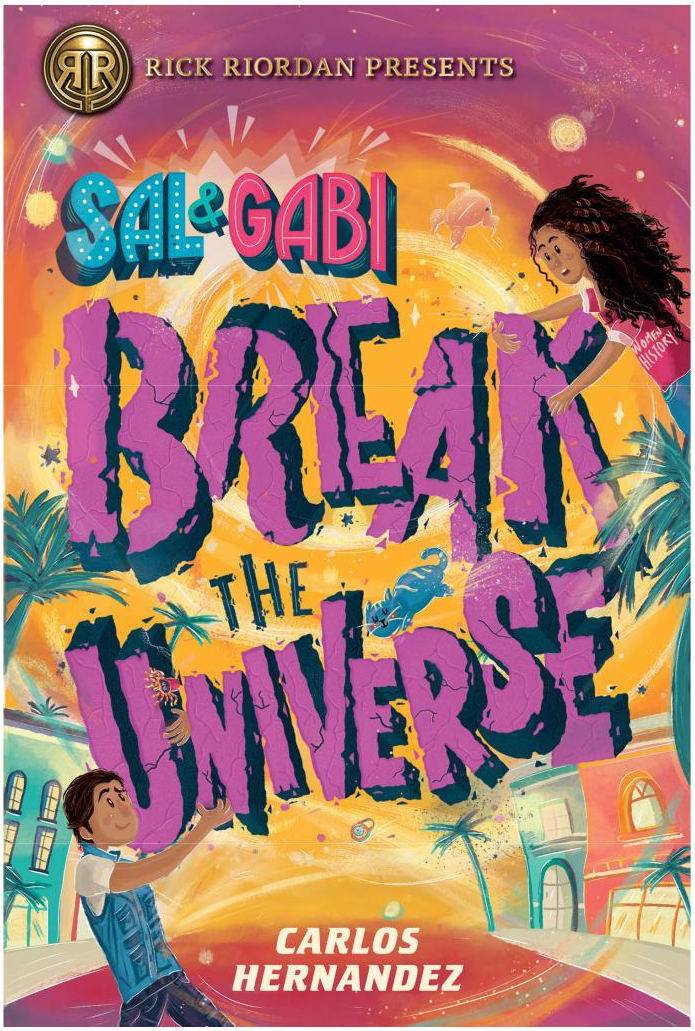
"So you say. But I am not leaving these premises until I have shown Min the message. Are you not curious to see his last communication?"

That did the trick.

"Min!" Mom called.

**Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Sal & Gabi Break the Universe* by Carlos Hernandez!**

# TAP TO BUY



**THERE'S ALL SORTS** of bad advice out there about how to deal with bullies. *Ignore them. Stand up to them. Tell a teacher, tell a parent, tell your dentist while he's jamming your teeth back into your face.*

The real way to deal with a bully is to stick a raw chicken in their locker.

I had my showdown with Yasmany Robles just three days after I had started my new life at Culeco Academy of the Arts, a magnet school in the middle of Miami. To get in, you had to have good grades, pass an interview, and either submit a portfolio (for painting or writing) or audition (for theater or music). You'd think all the effort someone has to go through to get into Culeco would've kept out bullies, but I guess not.

I guess there are just too many of them in the world. If your school only allowed in kids who'd never pick on anyone, you'd have an empty school.

Whatever. It's not like I hadn't learned how to handle bullies back in Connecticut.

On Wednesday, between fourth and fifth periods, I went to the lockers, along with half a million other kids. I stowed my history book and grabbed math so I could do my homework during lunch, then opened my bag of magic tricks and put on my GOTCHA! stamp ring. We would be doing introductions in my eighth-period theater class, and I thought I could use it to demonstrate some sleight of hand. Magic is kind of my thing.

I had a minute before I needed to go, so I took out my diabetes bag and fished out my glucose meter. I thought I'd be all right until lunch, but I'd started to feel spacey and dreamy at the end of my last class. Blood sugar levels might be falling. Best to check now.

As I rummaged, I noticed the tall kid next to me struggling to get his locker open. He was as Cuban as they come: brown, built like a track-and-field champ, with a haircut so short you could see the bumpy skin of his scalp beneath what was left of his tiny curls. He'd wrestled with his combination lock yesterday, too, and never figured it out, so he'd had to carry a full backpack of books to his next class. I'd had trouble with my lock on the first day, until I'd figured out you have to squeeze it as you turn the dial.

And I'm a nice guy. So I said to him, "Hey, man. My lock sucks, too. The trick is to squeeze the top while—"

That's all I got out before he punched his locker. The whole hallway grew a little quieter.

Yasmany—I learned his name later, but why keep you in suspense?—slowly turned to look at me. He scanned me up and down, doing some tough-guy calculations to figure out if he could take me.

Apparently he thought he could, because he stepped up to me fast, ferocious, chest out, arms wide. He'd been in a lot of fights, judging from his flat-as-a-shamrock nose.

"Just come back from safari, white boy?" he asked. "I mean, if you even *are* a boy." Let's take a second to break down this insult.

The "safari" crack was because I had on canvas cargo pants and a cargo vest, each with four pockets brimming with gadgets and tricks of the trade. Pretty much all the clothes I own have tons of pockets. I'm ready to perform at any time. You never know when the world is going to need a little magic.

The "white boy" crack was because—I guess?—to him I looked white. Back when I lived in Connecticut, kids were telling me to "go back to brown town" all the time. But I was in Miami now: new place, new rules about skin color.

And the "if you are a boy"? I kept my hair pretty long. It gave me a place to hide stuff in the middle of a trick. And to this caveman's mind, calling someone a girl was an insult.

Whatever. I tried the *My Little Pony* approach to handling bullies. "Sorry. Just trying to help." And I started to walk away.

He body-blocked me. "*You?* Wanted to help *me*? Why would a sandwich like you think I'd need your help?"

Now I looked him in the eye. "Your locker's still locked, isn't it?"

I probably shouldn't have said anything. But he called me a sandwich. Some insults you can't let slide.

In response, he did what bullies do. He slapped my diabetes bag out of my hands.

It hit the ground with a glassy crunch. My stomach crunched right along with it.

That pack contained my insulin, my syringes, my blood-glucose meter, my sharps disposal container (for used needles), my Band-Aids, and a fun-size bag of Skittles. If he broke something important in that pack, I could be in real trouble.

I knelt down to pick it up, my hands shaking as they reached for the bag. I tried to relax. I closed my eyes, breathed slowly, and remembered what Papi had said to me after Mami died: *Fear is your body trying to tell your brain what to do. But the brain is the king of the body. It calls the shots.*

I opened my eyes slowly, the way the good guys in movies do when they've just figured out how to beat the villain. I noticed that the bright young scholars of Culeco Academy of the Arts had formed a ring around Yasmany and me. This crowd didn't seem as bloodthirsty as the ones in my last school had been. In Connecticut, kids hooted like in *Planet of the Apes* whenever a fight was about to start, jumping up and down and beating on each other in anticipation of someone getting wedgied back to the Stone Age. But these kids looked kind of grim and quiet, like this was some boring school assembly they had to attend.

Well, from my perspective, it didn't really matter whether they were enjoying themselves or not. They had me surrounded just the same. I was trapped.

Wait. No. That's an excuse, and I don't lie to myself. I could have pushed my way out of there if I'd wanted to. But now all eyes were on me. I had an audience. And I am a showman.

Yasmany stretched his fingers wide before he made two fists. "Time to die, little man.

Stand up." I stood all right. Got right in his face. "Time to die?" I asked. "Time. To.

Die," he repeated.

"Like the dead chicken in your locker?" I asked.

"What?"

See, that's the real secret of dealing with bullies: Change the game. You thought we were going to fistfight, Mr. Tough Guy, but—surprise!—suddenly we're talking about murdered poultry.

"The dead chicken in your locker," I said, explaining it to the crowd. "That's the real reason you didn't want to open it. You didn't want anybody to see your dead chicken so they wouldn't know you keep dead chickens in your locker. Because," I said, turning to face Yasmany again, "what kind of weirdo keeps dead chickens in his locker?"

"Stop saying 'dead chicken'!"

Everybody laughed. That probably would have sent Yasmany into a berserker rage if some girl hadn't shrieked, "Blood!" She was pointing at Yasmany's locker.

"What?" Yasmany asked again. He and everybody else looked at his locker, and yeah, there was watery pink blood leaking from it, the kind you find at the bottom of Styrofoam meat packages. Not a lot, but enough to drip from the bottom of the locker door and pool on the floor. And it only takes a tiny bit of blood to freak people all the way out.

Not me, though. I mean, I didn't know SANGRE DE POLLO was going to come dripping out of his locker, but it wasn't exactly a surprise, either. I could work with it.

"Open it," I said to Yasmany. "Unless you're too…*chicken*."

If he hadn't been completely bewildered by what was happening, he would have gorilla-rushed me for sure. Instead, he walked over to his locker and tried to undo the lock. Two, four, seven yanks on it, each angrier than the last. Then he punched his locker door again and said, "I can't open the stupid thing! I keep trying, but I can't."

"Here. Let me."

He took a step back to let me through. But not without asking, "What? How you know my combo?"

His "combo" was still taped to the back of the lock. About as sharp as a bowling ball, this Yasmany.

I looked at him over my shoulder with spooky eyes and replied, "Fool! I am a magician. I can read your mind." Then I spun the dial with fast fingers, clock-, then counter-, then clockwise again. I tugged the lock open dramatically and, with a flourish, removed it.

"You want the honors?" I asked him, stepping aside with a gracious magician's bow.

Yasmany—bro had gone full autopilot by now—stepped forward and opened the locker door, every kid behind him on tiptoe, watching, waiting.

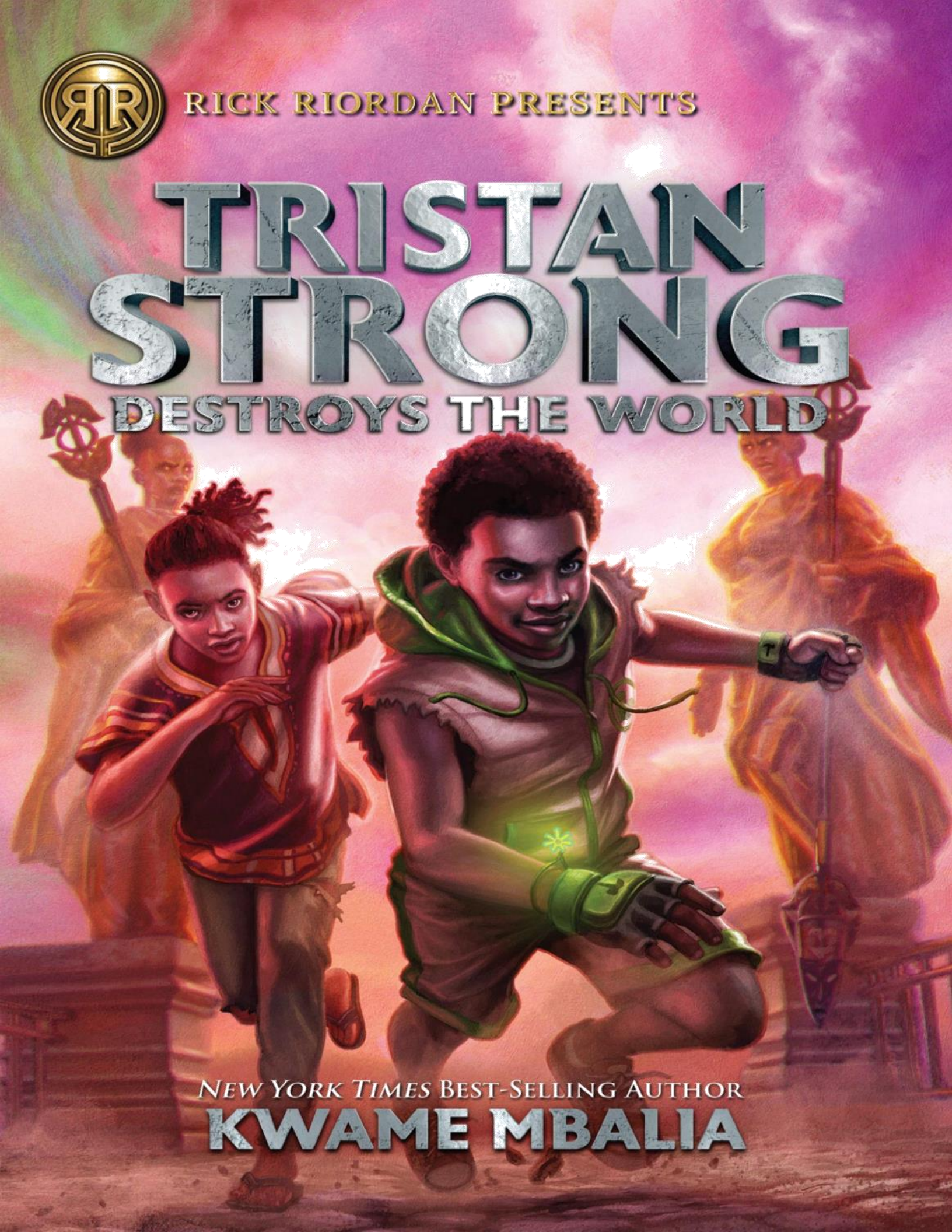
A whole raw chicken, like you get at the grocery store, with bumpy yellow skin and no head, flipped out of his locker, landed on its chicken butt, and went *splat*.

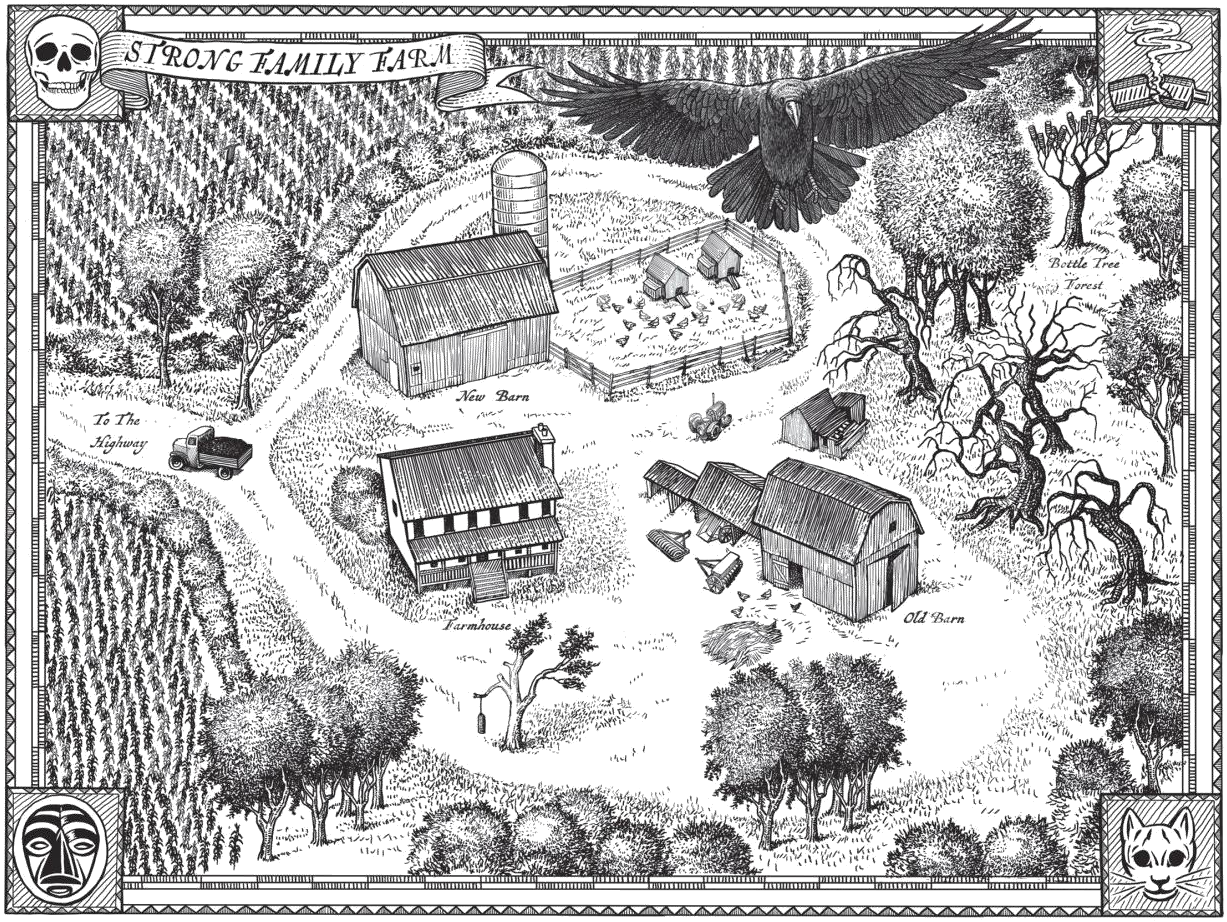
Kids scattered, screaming. Adults would be here any second. Yasmany did a 180 and looked around wildly. He didn't have eyes anymore: just fear. "I didn't put no dead chicken in my locker!" he yelled. "You gotta believe me!"

"I believe you," I said.

Of course I did. It was I who had put it in there, after all.

Abracadabra, chicken plucker.


RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS
TRISTAN STRONG
DESTROYS THE WORLD
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
KWAME MBALIA


STRONG FAMILY FARM
New Barn
To The Highway
Farmhouse
Old Barn
Bottle Tree Forest

## Praise for *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*

★ “Mbalia expertly weaves a meaningful portrayal of family and community with folklore, myth, and history—including the legacy of the slave trade—creating a fast-paced, heroic series starter.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

★ “Mbalia’s African American and West African gods (with villains tied to US chattel slavery and the Middle Passage specifically) touch on the tensions between the cultures, a cultural nuance oft overlooked. Readers who want more than just a taste of Alke will be eager for future books.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ “Perfectly paced, this cinematic adventure never drags, anchored by Tristan’s conversational narration and balanced by his struggle to cope with a friend’s passing. It brims with heart, humor, and action, successfully crafting a beautifully unified secondary world that brings the power of stories to glorious life.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

★ “This debut novel offers a richly realized world, a conversational, breezy style, and a satisfying conclusion that leaves room for sequels.”

—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

★ “Overall a stellar mix of the playful and the serious, the traditional and the original, this novel marks the emergence of a strong new voice in myth-based children’s fantasy.”

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* (starred review)

“A brilliant action adventure rooted in African American lore.”

—*New York Times* best-selling author Jason Reynolds

2020 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award

*Publishers Weekly* Best Books of 2019
Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best Books of 2019 The *New York Times* 25 Best Children's Books of 2019 2019 Middle Grade Fiction Nerdie NCTE Charlotte Huck Award Recommended Book
A Junior Library Guild Selection

# TRISTAN STRONG DESTROYS THE WORLD

BOOK 2

KWAME MBALIA

RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

Disney • HYPERION

Los Angeles New York

Copyright © 2020 by Cake Literary

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of Buena Vista Books, Inc. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion, 125 West End Avenue, New York, New York 10023.

Created in association with Cake Literary

Designed by Tyler Nevins
Map illustration © 2020 by Robert Venables
Cover art © 2020 by Eric Wilkerson
Cover design by Tyler Nevins

ISBN 978-1-368-06802-4

Visit www.DisneyBooks.com
Follow @ReadRiordan

# CONTENTS

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
1: Tricksters and Whispers
2: The Sparring Match
3: Two-Piece Special
4: The Spirits Come Calling
5: Buried Trauma
6: Ghost Cats
7: Strong Blood
8: The Man in the Iron-Monster Mask
9: Unspooling a Story
10: Riverboat Rideshare
11: Keelboat Annie
12: Talking Skulls
13: Hero’s Welcome
14: A Race to Trouble
15: When the Gods Fade
16: Bumbletongue Overboard
17: Kulture Vulture
18: Birds of a Feather
19: The City of Lakes

20: Where's Mami Wata?
21: Boo Hag Blues
22: Juke Joint Jamboree
23: Jollof Rice
24: The Plat-eyes' Tale
25: I Don't Want to Fight
26: Get Back Up
27: Return of the Maafa
28: Shadows of Greatness
29: Eye of the Storm
30: Free Mami Wata
31: The Gang's All Here
32: Beachfront Showdown
33: Hosed Down
34: The World Undone
35: United We Stand
36: I Will Find You
Acknowledgments
About the Author

For the stories across the Diaspora, and the elders who carried them

# 1
# TRICKSTERS AND WHISPERS

**NOBODY LIKES GETTING PUNCHED IN THE FACE.**

Call it a hunch or an educated guess. Either way, I can confirm from firsthand experience that getting punched in the face is way down on the list of enjoyable activities. It's somewhere between eating a halfway-scraped-off piece of burnt toast and giving yourself a wedgie. Nope. Don't like it. *Especially* when it's accompanied by my grandfather's trash talk.

*POP!*

"C'mon, boy! Keep your head moving! Unless you wanna make your living lying down on the mat. You want me to build you a house down there? I can get you a one-room studio, utilities included."

When I opened my eyes, Granddad was standing over me with his hands on his hips. Well, his mitts on his hips. He wore gray jogging sweats and a crisp white T-shirt that he had probably ironed. His afro, neatly trimmed and nearly all gray, moved from side to side as he grumbled and shook his head. He took off one mitt and held out a massive brown hand with scars on the knuckles. When I reached up with my right glove and he pulled me to my feet, I could feel the strength that had made him a legend in the boxing circuit.

"You gotta move," Granddad said. He got into a boxer's crouch and started bobbing and weaving his head. "You're too stiff in there right now, like something's holding you back. What's wrong? You asked for this, remember? You tired?"

We were inside the old barn on my grandparents' farm. The early-afternoon sun peeked through gaps in the walls, sending warm yellow rays down in stripes across the packed dirt floor. Granddad and I had been working all day—clearing out junk, sweeping, stuff like that. A makeshift boxing ring now stood in the middle of the open space, and a few other adults were setting up benches.

Why, I hear you asking, did I volunteer for this?

Well, a few days ago, Granddad had gotten a call from an old buddy he knew back on the amateur boxing circuit, now a trainer himself. A practice bout for one of his new prospects had been canceled because of a storm, and he wanted to know if Granddad knew of anyone they could spar with.

*Why yes*, I imagined Granddad saying, *I have the perfect sparring partner. No, don't worry, he's up for the challenge.*

That, my friends, isn't volunteering. That's called being volun-told. So I had a sparring match in an hour or so, and I was *not* looking forward to it, but Granddad had insisted I get in one good match before I left to go back home to Chicago.

Yay.

But don't get me wrong. I wasn't backing down. I wanted the challenge. Kept me distracted. Helped suppress unwanted thoughts. Mr. Richardson, my counselor, called them *intrusive thoughts*. Busy hands, calm mind.

And when you trained with Granddad, your hands stayed busy.

"No, sir, I'm not tired." I hopped up, slammed my gloves together, and started the routine again.

Granddad held up his mitts, and I let my hands go to work.

"All right, boy," my grandfather said. "One-two."

I took a deep breath and fired off the punch combination. Sharp. Quick. Had to be better. Had to get stronger. Step forward, twist the hips, snap off a punch.

Faster.

FASTER.

FAST—

"All right, boy, all right. Don't get too worked up." Granddad backed away and dropped the mitts. I stopped in mid-jab, breathing hard. "I told you, we're warming up. What's gotten into you?"

I started to answer, then closed my mouth. I didn't know how to explain my need to improve, the weight I felt on my shoulders.

Granddad watched me closely. “Take a deep breath. You sure you ain’t tired? I heard you up late last night, then early this morning. You getting enough sleep?”

I bounced on my feet. “I’m okay, Granddad. I’m ready.”

“I’ll tell you when you’re ready. Just breathe. You look tired.”

I rolled my neck, trying to loosen up, looking everywhere around the barn instead of at Granddad. Pictures and posters decorated the walls, detailing fights from years past, and faded brown boxing gloves dangled from a beam running across the high two-story ceiling. But the real eye-catcher was a giant mural depicting two men, a weary boxer with one fist up as he curled a bicep, and his cornerman, towel slung over his shoulder, standing behind him with both arms flexed.

It was Alvin Strong, my dad, the night he defended his championship for the first time, and his trainer, Walter Strong—Granddad.

I once asked Granddad why he’d chosen to commemorate that night and not the time Dad had won the belt in the first place. He’d scratched his beard, then made a fist and flexed, like Dad in the mural. “Taking the belt was a feat, I’ll grant you. Somethin’ hard, worthy of a mural, I suppose. But it’s one thing to take the belt when don’t nobody see you coming. It’s another to stare down an entire country while you got a target on your back, and then beat them challengers into submission. It’s hard to win a belt…. It’s even harder to keep it.”

As I shook my arms to loosen them and then slipped my mouthpiece back in, Granddad stood beneath that mural. He might have been older, skinnier, with more wrinkles and less hair, but the same strength still radiated from him. I had that strength, too. I’d used it before, and I was going to have to use it again. Because, as much as it pained me, I *had* asked to train. I needed to get stronger.

“I’m okay, Granddad. Honest,” I said, pounding my gloves together again. “I’m not tired at all.”

“Mm-hmm. We’ll see. Here we go. One-two. One-two. Good. Hook coming in. One-two. One-two. Tuck that chin in, boy, show these hands some respect! One-two. That’s it, that’s the Walter Strong special. Watch it, now. Good!”

*POP! POP!*

I snapped lefts and rights at the mitts as Granddad called the cadence, and for a while I did good. When the hooks came in from either direction, I

ducked them, and when the straights came in, I dodged them, weaving from side to side so they went sailing by. A rhythm had me bouncing on my feet and practicing the sweet science. It felt good. I got into a groove.

*POP! POP!*

And then it happened.

A sound drifted past my ear. Something tiny and faint. A breath of wind brushed my cheek. A chill gripped my chest, making it hard to breathe.

*Tristan…*

Someone whispered my name. And right after that, another sound reached my ears. My heart seized up. My fists dropped as I turned toward whatever—or whoever—it was.

"Tristan!"

I recovered too late.

*WHAP!*

The hook came again and clipped the side of my head, sending me head over heels. It didn't hurt—it just knocked me upside down—but Granddad grew upset. He took off the mitts and tossed them out of the ring.

"Now what done got into you?! What is so fascinating that you'd take a punch from your opponent just to get a peek at it? Hmm? A piece of trash on the ground? You ain't even here—you off somewhere in your head!"

I didn't answer. Something fluttered across the floor, tumbling between the feet of the adults who were trying hard to not look at us. It was a receipt, crumpled up and harmless. I let out a shaky breath. Granddad waited, then sighed and motioned for me to come over. He unlaced the gloves and pulled them off, then undid the wraps on my hands and wrists. He worked quickly, then gathered up everything and stared at the mural on the barn wall.

"Boy," he said without looking at me. "Let's take fifteen. I need to get some water in me anyway. You look exhausted, and you're chewing on something in that head of yours and need to spit it out. Whatever it is, you can't bring that into the ring. Distractions will be the end of you before your opponent throws a single punch."

He stepped out of the ring and stuffed the equipment into a giant faded-green army duffel. He strained once, then stopped and took a deep breath. With a grunt, he lifted the bag over his shoulders and headed off. "I'll be back with the body pads," he said over his shoulder. "Then we're going to start over. I expect you to be ready to get serious."

Granddad marched out and the spectators followed him, leaving me alone in the barn, staring at the balled-up receipt. Tiny. Like a small wad of cotton. That had bad associations for me. But the piece of paper wasn't the actual distraction. I just couldn't tell Granddad that. A whisper? He would've stared at me like I'd sprouted an extra armpit on my forehead. And who could blame him?

How could I tell him that, just for a second, I'd thought I heard a faint drumbeat?

A miffed, cultured voice jerked me out of my thoughts.

"You know, boy, the least you could do is remove me from your sweaty pocket before you start prancing about in your silly outfit and gloves. Hurry up and let me breathe. Or do you plan on moping forever?"

It came from my training shorts. I rolled my eyes and pulled out a shiny black phone with a gold spider emblem on the back, sleek and brand-new. When I raised it, the screen blinked on and a splash screen appeared—a fancy box with the word STORY written inside it. The image faded away, and in its place appeared a tiny brown man stomping back and forth, hopping over glowing app icons and kicking aside the clock. He wore flip-flops, pants that were either too short or shorts that were too long, and a T-shirt with a grinning spider on it. Anansi's sense of style was somewhere between lazy dad and retro-chic teen, and I could only shake my head.

Why was Anansi, the original trickster, the master of storytelling, the weaver of tales and webs of mischief, inside my phone?

Great question!

Because a month ago a tiny loudmouth stole my dead best friend's journal.

Because in my anger I punched a hole into a different realm where Black folktale heroes and African gods walk around like you and me.

Because I accidentally brought a diabolical haint with me, stirring up an even more ancient evil.

Because I caught Anansi trying to use all the confusion to gain power for himself instead of helping the people, and this was his punishment.

Because I am an Anansesem, a carrier and spreader of stories, and this phone is the Story Box, the vessel in which those stories are stored, and which it is my responsibility to watch over and refill.

Because I got the hookup, that's why. Now stop asking questions.

Anyway, that was a month ago. It had been thirty days since Eddie— well, his spirit, actually, since he's my dead best friend—told me good-bye for the last time. Since then I'd read aloud every word in the journal he left me and recorded it with the Listen Chile app on the SBP (Story Box Phone —give me a break, let me be lazy).

The SBP's screen went blank, and then the lock screen appeared. Anansi glanced at the Story Box logo, then sat down and leaned his back against it. He pulled a black pixel out of the background and began to toss it against the edge of the screen like a ball.

"Look," he said gently. "I know you and I haven't seen eye to eye…."

I snorted.

"And we might've gotten off on the wrong foot—"

"You tried to get the people of Isihlangu to throw us in their dungeons," I said with a raised eyebrow.

Anansi flapped his hand and waved the words away. "Stop living in the past. We have to look toward the future. I am due for a reprieve from this prison soon, and that can't happen if you don't pay attention to incoming fists. Who will tell old Nyame I fulfilled my obligations if you're unconscious? Who will transcribe your grandmother's fantastic key lime pie recipe for me? No, no, you must focus."

I shrugged and started rewrapping my hands. Granddad would be back any minute now, and I needed to be ready. If I could just get through this match, the rest of the week would fly by, and then I'd be on my way back to Chicago. "I'll be fine."

"It appears to me you're not acting

fine." "I'm good. Relax."

Anansi raised an eyebrow. "And the nightmares?"

Whispers drifted past my ear again. A rhythm pulsed from somewhere out in the cornfield behind the barn—a fast drumbeat that sent my heart racing. I hadn't told anyone about the bad dreams that had sent me lurching up in bed every night since returning from Alke. This is why you can't leave a trickster god on your nightstand while you sleep. I tugged on my gloves, then stood. "I'll. Be. Fine."

"You can't punch your way out of everything, boy. Sooner or later you'll find someone or something that punches harder. Trust me."

Before I could respond to *that* startling piece of wisdom, the barn door creaked open. Granddad walked in; sure enough, he wasn't alone. A crowd

gathered behind him, and Nana—my grandmother—stood by his side, but my eyes were on the person standing next to him.

“By my eight ashy legs,” Anansi whispered. “That boy is huge!”

“Let’s go, boy—up and at ’em,” Granddad said. “It’s time to spar.”

# 2
# THE SPARRING MATCH

**LIFE ISN'T FAIR.**

That's what every adult has said when I've told them something wasn't fair. You've probably heard the same thing. *Oh, nothing's fair. You have to play the cards you're dealt.* Well, why are we even playing cards? I don't even like card games!

Anyway…

What *really* wasn't fair was my sparring partner. His name was Reggie Janson, and he stood taller than most of the adults surrounding the ring. Wider, too. I mean, even his muscles had muscles. Smooth brown skin, JAWBREAKER scrawled in graffiti print on his hoodie and trunks, and a face pulled into a scowl that made him look meaner than the neighborhood dog everyone steers clear of. His legs were tree trunks and his gloves bowling balls. In short—

"You might want to rethink this," Anansi said into my ear. I was wearing my earbuds in the hope of tuning out the prefight noise and commotion, but what I got was trickster-god color commentary over some chopped-and-screwed classic hip-hop songs. Yep, apparently Anansi had discovered streaming and was currently obsessed with Houston rap.

I ignored him. He might have been right, but still, he didn't have to come out and say it. Whatever happened to false encouragement?

I continued my warm-up until Granddad came over with a water bottle and a towel. He was chewing on a blade of grass, which he only did when

he was worried. “Okay,” he said, “stick to the basics. A simple sparring match, three rounds, nothing serious.”

The sound of a small explosion filled the barn.

We all turned to see Reggie’s trainer standing over a ruptured punching bag that had hit the floor, sand spilling out. Reggie turned, saw me watching, and shrugged, then started shadowboxing.

“Sweet peaches,” Anansi and I said at the same time.

Granddad chewed the blade of grass even harder, as if he were having second thoughts, but then he shook his head. “You’ll be fine” was all he said.

I nodded, then someone caught my eye. A short curly-haired woman in hospital scrubs had opened the barn doors and stepped inside. She saw somebody she recognized and waved. “Who’s that?” I asked.

Granddad turned and grunted. “Hmm. Ring doctor. Travels with Reggie when he spars, just to be safe.”

“Reggie travels with a doctor? Is he sick?”

“The doctor isn’t for him. She’s here for his opponents.”

My jaw dropped, but Granddad studiously avoided my eyes and spat out the blade of grass before pulling another from his pocket. Who keeps grass in their pocket? And who sets up a boxing match like this for their grandson? I wanted to protest. Maybe it wasn’t too late for me to back out and take up a less threatening sport, like staring contests. But I didn’t have a chance to suggest it before Granddad turned around and started clapping. “All right, let’s get started. Tony, you ready?”

Reggie’s trainer flashed a thumbs-up before slapping his boxer on the shoulder.

I took out my earbuds and dropped them and the SBP onto a bench in the corner. Anansi was lying on his back with his eyes closed when I left him. *Thanks for your support*, I thought as I walked away.

Reggie and I both climbed into the ring. We had on our headgear, but I felt like I needed a football helmet as extra protection.

“All right, keep it clean, but take it serious. We ain’t here to hurt nobody. It’s just a tune-up, right?” Tony, Reggie’s trainer, looked between us with an eyebrow raised, and we both nodded. “Good. Let’s show them folks how we roll down here in Alabama.” He stepped out of the ropes and put a whistle in his mouth. “Touch ’em up, then wait for my whistle.”

Reggie's gloves pounded into mine as we stood face-to-face. "Why so tight, little bro? It's just a sparring match."

We backed up. I bounced on my toes, ready to do this thing.

At least I thought so.

The whistle came and my fists went up, just as a right hook came howling toward the left side of my head. I ducked, and a left uppercut streaked toward my face. Somehow, at the last minute, I managed to twist my body so my shoulder took the blow.

The impact sent me flat on my butt.

"C'mon, boy, what're you doing? Get up and get in the match!" Granddad's gruff voice and the snickers from the crowd brought a flushing heat to my face. I climbed to my feet and rotated my right shoulder. It felt like a hammer had battered it.

*Just a tune-up. Right.*

As if he could hear my thoughts, Reggie grinned. Jeez, even his mouthpiece said JAWBREAKER. Was there anything peaceful about him?

The rest of the round was more of the same. Me ducking. Me slipping and twisting. Me trying not to die as fists the size of my face tried to punch me into another zip code. At the end of the round, Tony the Trainer (look, it's how I remembered his name) blew his whistle and I collapsed onto the stool Granddad had waiting for me. I took a sip of water and tried to force some air into my lungs.

"You dancing or you boxing?" Granddad held up a bucket for me to spit out the water. "You know you can throw some punches, too?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Do you want me to call the match? Is it too much?"

"No, sir. Just—"

"Just what?"

"Just waiting for an opening."

Granddad put down the bucket and placed both hands on my shoulders. "Sometimes, boy, you gotta make your own opening. Don't wait for somebody to give you permission to do your best. You let 'em have it and leave all that other mess for the hogs. Fight for something! You got it? Grab whatever you need to grab deep down inside of yourself, whether it's pride or honor or even just the love of fighting, and you fight for it. Got me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got me?"

"Yes, sir!"

Round two started out the same, though. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't land a blow during Reggie's barrage. The dude had punches that threw punches. He clipped me a good one on the top of the head when I didn't duck fast enough, and it felt like a cannonball had grazed my skull.

Even so, Reggie was getting frustrated with all my defense. "You planning on fighting today?" he taunted. "Scared money don't make money."

The second round ended, and Granddad didn't say much. He rubbed my shoulders and gave me a little water, but I could tell he was disappointed.

And that wasn't even the worst part.

Just before the third round started, I heard it again.

*Tristan?*

A voice calling my name. Even stranger, a tingling sensation rippled down the fingers of my left hand and circled my wrist. The barn door was closed, but I swore I felt a breeze swirl around me. A humming song sounded faintly in my ears, and the dull thuds of a giant drum echoed around the barn.

"Oh no," I whispered, looking around wildly to see if anyone else had noticed. But everyone seemed focused on the match. This was something only I could hear.

Well, there was one other person…sort of.

The SBP still lay on the bench at the edge of the ring, partially covered by a damp towel Granddad had dropped. I could just make out Anansi's worried face as he tried to peer over the edge of the screen and into the crowd. He'd felt something strange, too, and it had left him shaken.

*That makes two of us,* I thought as Tony the Trainer blew his whistle for the final round.

Everyone had given up on me.

Tony kept glancing at me and shaking his head as he backed up. A few of the adults who'd gathered to watch—those that still remained—were no longer paying the sparring session any attention. Even Granddad seemed uninterested. He met my eyes…then looked away.

That hurt the most.

Reggie bounced on his toes and knocked his gloves together. Every time he did, it sounded like two cinder blocks slamming together. "C'mon, man,

let's get this over with. I thought the legendary Coach Strong would have some sort of prodigy for a grandson. No shade, but I guess we can't all be great."

"Yeah," I muttered. "That sorta sounds like shade to me." I wanted the match to end so I could escape to a corner somewhere. Maybe a hole. With a bag of cheese puffs and some root beer. And—

A soft fragment of a song drifted through the talking crowd to my ears. *Tristan…*

I looked up, confused. Reggie danced in front of me, shaking out his arms and rocking his head from side to side. "Did you hear that?" I asked.

"The ringing?" Reggie's mouthpiece muffled his speech, but when he tapped his glove against the side of his head, I got the message. "Don't worry, little bro, it's only gonna get WORSE." He grunted the last word as he ripped a right hook toward my temple. It missed by inches, but he followed it up with a barrage of jabs and straights that took every ounce of Granddad's training to avoid. Bob, weave, duck, backpedal. Even with all that, a few blows landed. A right slipped through my guard and grazed my ribs. An uppercut nicked my chin when I threw my head back too slowly.

I backed up, panting. This was getting out of hand. Granddad stood on the ring apron, halfway over the ropes, shouting something at me. Why couldn't I make it out? Had I lost my hearing? Was I in a daze? Reggie stalked toward me and I was raising my fists when—

*Tristan…*

There it was again! From the crowd. I could hear a voice—a different one this time. No, several.

*Tristan!*

*Help, please!*

*He's coming!*

So many voices. And beneath them I heard a rhythm. *The* rhythm. The one I hadn't heard in a month. Not since a giant shadow crow had flown me through a gash of roaring fire.

Something surged inside me. A feeling. A power. But why here? Why now? Bright light flashed and caught my eye. The SBP was ringing. Was I getting a call? Or was it Anansi? I felt the tingling on my wrist again, like when your foot falls asleep. It felt like I was trying to wake up. Or someone was trying to wake me up. They needed me. I was being summoned to—

Reggie dashed forward and bull-rushed me into the ropes. His head ground against mine, and he looked up, a sharklike grin exposing his custom mouthpiece.

"You're wasting my time," he snarled. "Do me a favor and stay down." "What do y—"

Before I could finish, Reggie reared back, his right fist cocked behind him, ready to unleash fury. Then I understood. He wanted to end the fight now. His fist roared forward, a heat-seeking missile with a target lock on my face. If it connected it was game over, good night, thanks for playing.

I couldn't let that happen.

*Fight for something,* Granddad had said. Fight for something. Fight for something! "Alke," I whispered.

*POP! POP!*

# 3
# TWO-PIECE SPECIAL

**NO ONE MOVED.**

A second passed. Two. Three. An eternity. Granddad's eyes were wide and Tony the Trainer gawked. The chatter and conversations had stopped. No one in the crowd moved a muscle. All attention was on the ring and the two fighters standing in the middle of it.

Well, one of us was still standing.

Reggie lay on his back, his eyes fixed on me, astonished. It looked as if this was the first time he'd ever been knocked down and he couldn't believe it. Slowly, a furious expression crept across his face.

"Walter Strong's two-piece special, no biscuit," I said, bouncing on my toes. "You ready to box?"

Reggie slammed his gloves into the ground, then shot to his feet with a growl. I dropped into my stance, feet wide and gloves up, ready for whatever barrage he was preparing to unleash. But before the two of us could resume our battle, Tony the Trainer hopped into the ring and grabbed Reggie around his shoulders.

"Hold it, hold it! Just a sparring match, remember? Look at me." The trainer checked Reggie's pupils, but the boy kept shifting side to side to scowl at me. "Hey, come on, let me see. You good?"

The ring doctor stepped up, too. Reggie tried to wave them both away, but they insisted on doing their due diligence and led him to the corner. A hand clapped me on the shoulder. Granddad stood behind me, a hint of a smile on his face.

"Two-piece special, huh?" he asked. "You did good, boy."

I smiled. “Thanks, Granddad.”

He pulled me into a fierce one-armed hug, then pushed me to the opposite corner. “Go take a break, get some water. Let me check on them, see if they need anything. I’m pretty sure this bout is finished.” He went over and crouched beside Tony and the doctor and murmured something.

I walked to the far side of the ring, nodded at a few people who congratulated me, and leaned against the ropes. My knees felt like jelly, and I let out a shaky breath.

*He’s coming!*

The words slipped in between my thoughts and hovered at the front of my mind. I stared at my wrist. Quickly, using my teeth to loosen the Velcro straps, I pulled off my boxing gloves. I hopped out of the ring, grabbed the phone, and slipped the earbuds back into my ears. While everyone else’s attention was focused on Alabama’s number one Intermediate boxing prospect, I ducked out the barn door.

“Anansi,” I said, “I need your help.”

I was sitting on a tuft of grass around the back of the barn, slowly unwinding the wraps from my wrists as the breeze cooled the sweat on my skin. It was a gorgeous afternoon. The sun draped the farm in warm golden rays. Birds sang their late-day chorus as insects buzzed and chirped in the cornfield behind me (no crickets…best believe I double-checked that).

The SBP was propped in front of me on the ground. On the screen Anansi rolled over and kept snoring. A strand of silk from the web he’d stretched across the top corner drifted over his mouth, floated away as he exhaled, and returned once more. I poked the tiny god once, then twice.

How could he be asleep at a time like this? “Hey! Did you hear those voices back there? What do I…? Hey, wake up!” I poked the screen again, harder this time, and the trickster god sprang to his feet with a cry and pulled the belt from around his waist in a flash.

“WHO WANNA ROMP?!” he shouted, looking around wildly, twirling the belt above his head like a lasso. He was in his partial-spider form—a six-legged, two-armed man with shining brown skin and twinkling eyes. Right now he looked disheveled, and his voice boomed out of the earbuds. I winced. Alkean acoustics were pretty impressive.

“*Shh!* Stop shouting. I need your help.”

Anansi blinked, then frowned when he saw it was only me. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, and put his belt back on. “Oh. It’s you. Boy, don’t you know it’s bad form to poke a sleeping god? You’re quite lucky I only let a little Diaspora out.”

I frowned. “Diaspora? What does that mean?”

Anansi raised one tiny eyebrow and sniffed. “It means a group of people who originally came from one spot and then dispersed. How do you think my stories got spread? Folks carried them when they left or were stolen from their homeland and told the tales wherever they landed. I’m big all over, if you didn’t realize. My stories have been shared by queens who were taken to Jamaica, and by workers in Jamaica, Queens. From Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to Paris, France, I’m—as that rhythmic poet says—good in any hood.”

“Soooo…”

“So *Diaspora* means there are people who are scattered across the globe, in cities and towns and farms, but can all trace their roots back to a single source. For you and me, it means that even though we come from two different worlds, we can claim each other as kinfolk because of where we originated from.”

I sat there and digested that for a second. It was a lot to take in, and for a moment I wished my best friend, Eddie, were still alive so we could break it down. Even if I could talk to his spirit, that might help.

*Help!*

My head snapped up, and I sprang to my feet. “Nice lecture, but right now I need something else.”

“I told you once, boy—I’m not giving you my secret fried-plantain recipe.”

“I—What? No, nothing like that. I think…I think someone’s in trouble. I sensed something strange in the barn. It looked like you did, too. The last time I felt that, I was in—”

“Alke,” Anansi finished. A sly expression crossed his face, and the spider god clapped his hands and hopped up and down on his six feet. “All right, boy, stop hoarding your gourds. Let’s go take a peek.”

“Hoarding my gourds?” I muttered.

“Come on! Brother Anansi’s got your back.”

Like *that* was going to make me feel better.

“I had the feeling over there.” I crouched behind the barn and aimed the SBP’s camera through a loose slat. A crowd was still gathered around Reggie, but that wasn’t what I was focused on.

Anansi sat on the edge of the screen and pursed his lips. “Did you use the sky god’s adinkra?”

I shook my head. When I was in Alke, Nyame, the sky god, had given me a trinket with the symbol of his power: the Gye Nyame adinkra. By holding it I could actually *see* stories, the story threads that tied Alke together. It was just one of several magical charms I’d been given on my journey, and I’d worn them on a band around my wrist.

“Nah,” I said. Something like that would’ve been really helpful right now. The only problem was…“I buried the bracelet.”

Anansi stared at me like I’d started talking out of my ears. “You what?!” I didn’t meet his eyes. “I buried it. And the gloves—the ones John Henry gave me. I don’t know, I just…Having them nearby and not being able to see…anyone.” I almost slipped up and said *Ayanna.* “It hurt. Like homesickness, but for a place that wasn’t my home. Does that make sense?”

Anansi scratched his head and muttered something that sounded a lot like *Heroes, I swear*. Then he sighed. “We’ll talk about this later. Right now…Hmm. Yes, I can help, but I need a little permission.”

I shrugged. “Of course. I’m the one who asked you—”

“No, you giant bag of cobwebs, I need permission from this box Nyame trapped me in. I’m not supposed to use my powers, remember? You have to allow it.”

I stared at him suspiciously. “That sounds like something a trickster god would say.”

Anansi flopped backward and tipped his hat over his eyes. “Fine. I was just trying to help *you*. But suit yourself. I can go back to investigating the best napping position. Personally, I think hands-folded-over-the-belly-after-a-meal is best, but I need to study it some more.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I get it. You better not be planning anything, though. Otherwise, Nyame’s gonna hear about it.”

Anansi raised his hands innocently. As he did, an alert popped up above his head, the kind that asks permission to access your phone’s contacts list, or to know your location. Normally I’d automatically hit *yes*, but this time I felt the need to read the fine print aloud.

“‘Do you grant the recipient, Kwaku Anansi, the ability to manipulate the fabric of reality…?’ Wait, what? No!” I scanned the list. “‘Reinvent history’? No. ‘Own all stories from here on out’? No. ‘Exclusive audiobook rights to *Fight for Our Lives: The Tristan Strong Story*’? NO! Definitely not.”

I checked out the rest of them and tapped *yes* on the few I thought wouldn’t immediately imperil the world as we knew it. I hoped.

“There. That should do it. *Now* will you please help?”

Anansi flexed his fingers, stretched his six legs, and then dropped into a seated position and began pulling glimmering spiderwebs from his pants pockets. “At last, some tools. Okay, then. Let’s see what we can do.”

The camera app opened, went black, then infrared, and then bright silver. I winced and turned away. When I looked again, the searing light had faded and been replaced by a glittering cloud that drifted around the screen.

“Is that a filter?” I asked. “Like, for selfies?”

“Selkies are a different mythology.”

“Not selkies…You know what? Never mind.”

“Good. Now, show me where you heard someone,” Anansi said. His voice came through the earbuds with a musical lilt, full of laughter and mischief. It filled me with a sense of joy. I shook my head, then glared at him. Just what sort of permissions had I granted?

He flapped a hand at me, and I rolled my eyes and aimed the phone’s camera lens. The glitter on the screen drifted away, leaving a few bright outlines scattered about, and I gasped.

Anansi’s eyes widened and he gave a low whistle. “Well, I’ll be…”

“Anansi,” I asked slowly, “why are there ghosts in my grandparents’ barn?”

# 4
# THE SPIRITS COME CALLING

**SEVERAL TRANSPARENT FIGURES HOVERED ABOUT. THE FIRST**—a girl—might've been my age or a little older, but not by much. Her clothes were like nothing I'd seen before. She wore pants that billowed at the bottom with a wide flourish, ending at her bare feet. Her hair was plaited into small micro-braids that fell past her shoulders; shimmering wire had been woven into each braid, making them look like rippling waves every time she moved her head. She was by far the brightest of all the ghosts. Almost a beacon. Her eyes roamed the room, and she seemed keenly interested in everything inside the barn.

The other ghosts were an old badger whose fur would probably be just as silver without the SBP's filter, a human mother and father standing close together, a small child hanging on to their legs, and a teenage brother and sister. All of them looked scared.

"Where did these ghosts come from?" I asked Anansi.

"Not ghosts, boy—spirits. You know better. At least I'd hoped so, but you've disappointed me before." Anansi dropped into a squat on the SBP's screen to study the first spirit more closely. "And I think—no, I know—that this one is not ordinary."

"There are ordinary spirits?"

"Yes. Run-of-the-mill haints and spooks. Souls lingering due to unfinished business or because their deeds are keeping them from passing on, and some because they need assistance from the living. But other spirits

have a greater purpose." Anansi looked out at me. "Your friend on the bus was one of those, from what you told me."

Eddie, my dead best friend, had consistently tried to warn me that Anansi was trying to trick us all, and he'd done it while King Cotton, an evil haint, was holding him hostage. Friends, man. How many of us have them?

I swallowed the ball of sadness trying to lodge itself in my throat and nodded at the current spirit of the day, the brightest girl. "So, you're saying we have to figure out who she is and what brought her here?"

"Oh, I know who she is."

"You do?"

"Of course. She's an Alkean river spirit."

Was it my imagination, or did the girl stiffen when Anansi said that?

I nodded. "Of course. That makes perfect sense. So, how does—WAIT, WHAT? From Alke?"

Anansi nodded. "In fact, I'd say—yes, I'm pretty positive all of them are from Alke."

From Alke. The realm of stories where Black folk heroes and African gods coexisted—peacefully now, I hoped. The spirits were from Alke…. That statement knocked loose all my thoughts, and I tried to grab them and put them back in order. How could they be from Alke? We'd closed the hole between the worlds. Had it reopened? What else was slipping through?

Suddenly, as if my thinking about it had drawn her attention, the river spirit turned her head and looked straight at the camera. Like she knew I was there. I recognized her expression immediately. It had been on the faces of the Midfolk when they were being harassed by iron monsters in MidPass. It was on the sky god Nyame's face when he had described watching the people of the Golden Crescent being snatched away. The same expression had crossed the faces of the people of Isihlangu when the hullbeast had crashed through the doors of their mountain fortress and sent a swarm of brand flies to hunt everyone down. Oh, I knew that expression well.

Terror.

*He's coming!*

*Help!*

So these spirits were the ones I'd heard when I was fighting. "Anansi," I said slowly, then paused and licked my lips. "What would send spirits

fleeing from Alke to this world? And how can they even travel here? Didn't we close the hole in the sky?"

The spider god stood and folded his arms. He looked troubled. "I'm afraid I don't have the answers. But whatever's driving them must be terrible indeed."

I studied the spirits. The brother and sister clutched each other, cringing every time a living person passed through them. The badger had floated to the back of the barn, moving behind a stack of empty buckets to hide. Fear had driven them here…but fear of what?

"Tristan—" Anansi began, but I cut him off.

"Isn't there something we can do? Call the gods in Alke? Slide into their DMs?"

The spider god shook his head. "What you're asking…it's not impossible, but it's pretty close. And dangerous. Really dangerous. Once you open a connection, it stays open. And who knows who might pick up on the other end. No, I don't think so. And even if I wanted to, which I don't, I don't think I have the power to do it, not while stuck in this phone, anyway. Also, what's a DM? And why wouldn't someone just walk into it? Is sliding necessary? Flip-flops aren't the most athletic of footwear and, well, I have many legs, so…"

I zoomed out with the camera and as I did, another spirit materialized— a tall man. His faint outline wavered, but I could still see that he was holding a small child in his arms. I bit my lip. I had to do something. They'd all been drawn here for a reason—maybe it was the SBP or me, as an Anansesem. Whatever the case, I had to help them.

"We *have* to do something. Anansi, please—"

Suddenly, the camera app closed. The SBP began to vibrate, jostling Anansi off his feet and sending him falling head over six heels. Then the home screen reappeared.

A new app icon bloomed into view in the lower right of the screen: a black-and-ivory square with rounded edges and a silhouette of two people in the middle.

"'Contacts,'" I read aloud, confused. Then the realization hit me. It was a directory. I stared at it, slightly afraid, but also excited. The phone had never done that before. It was as if it had heard my needs and instantly created an app that would help me accomplish them. I love technology.

Anansi stared at the icon suspiciously. “Tristan, I don’t think you should __”

“Too late,” I said as I tapped it. The screen shimmered and faded to black until it looked as if Anansi were standing in empty space. Words swirled across the top of the screen.

*Enter the name of video call recipient.*

I quickly typed in the first person who came to mind.

Anansi groaned. “Not him,” he said, but the letters were already swirling and rearranging.

I took a deep breath and propped the phone on a loose board on the ground outside the barn. After a few seconds, a grand dining hall appeared on the screen. An incredibly long table stood in the middle, surrounded by elegant wooden chairs with beautiful images engraved on the backs. Golden statues lined the walls, and I squinted to see if I recognized any of the figures, but it was dark, like nighttime.

And there, at the head of the empty table, sat the largest man I’d ever seen. Even sitting down he seemed to fill the screen. He wore the same overalls I remembered, but the buckles were made of beaten gold, and underneath he wore a white shirt also trimmed in gold. He was bald and his dark skin gleamed even in the low light. At his feet, leaning against the edge of the chair, rested a mighty hammer, nearly as tall as I was, with a shining metal head and a carved wooden shaft. And yet…there was something off about the whole scene.

Bags under his eyes, head propped in one hand, his other fingers tapping on the armrest of the chair.

John Henry, leader of the gods of MidPass, looked

tired. I’d just opened my mouth to greet him

when— “What do you want?” he snapped.

My jaws clamped shut. I’d never heard him like this. Had I interrupted something important? I started to apologize when I saw Anansi waving at me out the corner of my eye. He was crouched in the very bottom right of the screen, holding a finger over his lips and shaking his head. *Don’t speak,* he mouthed.

I frowned. I was about to ask him what was wrong when John Henry looked up.

"I said," the giant folk hero said in his unmistakable rumble, anger coloring his voice. "What. Do. You. Want?"

Before I could stammer out a response, the screen rippled. Someone else was in the hall with him. Heavy footsteps sounded, and then a metal-covered arm entered the screen. A clawlike finger pointed at John Henry. I gulped. Waves of…*wrongness* radiated from that hand. I couldn't explain it. But John Henry seemed to know whoever it was.

Then the shadowy figure spoke.

"You know what has to be done." That voice. Something between a hiss and a roar. It was filled with pain…barely repressed, raw, and scalding. As if every word hurt. It was so awful, even John Henry winced at it.

"And I've told you that's impossible. Foolish, I reckon."

A low growl rumbled through the hall. "What is foolish, *grum grum*, is to let ourselves be chained like this. At any moment, what happened to us before could happen again. We need to take steps to prevent it. Already the whispers are starting. The ancestors and spirits are fleeing."

*Ancestors and spirits fleeing?* I looked at the barn. Could it be?

"We must act," the voice continued. "Unless…you'd rather see us burn again."

*CRACK!*

John Henry's massive hand had slammed down on the table. The echo filled the room and rattled my eardrums. He leaned forward, a furious expression on his face, but I also saw the exhaustion in his eyes. Wrinkles at the corners. He was dead tired, and whatever they were discussing had obviously been the source of many arguments in the past. He slid back his chair, stood up, and put his hands on his hips.

The shadowy figure came closer to the table, their cloak obscuring their features. Whoever it was, they were large. Very large. A hand reached out and touched the back of the chair where John Henry had been sitting.

The one his hammer was resting against.

An alarm sounded in my mind. I opened my mouth to yell a warning, but again Anansi held up a hand. Curiosity was written all over his face. I hesitated, then bit my lip and settled back to watch.

"You know it's true, *grum grum.* The fate of our world, our very lives, was left in the hands of an impostor. A charlatan. And he did not get the job

done. What happened before can happen again. And while he flew away, reaping all the glory, you and I had to fight to rebuild and keep our people together."

Impostor? Did he mean Anansi? But we *had* gotten the job done. We'd closed the tear between the worlds. I looked at Anansi, but he seemed just as confused as I was.

John Henry was shaking his head. "I understand your pain, friend, truly I do. But what you're asking…I reckon it's not time for that. Don't rightly know if it ever will be." The massive folk hero turned around in a circle and scratched his scalp. "Something else has been bothering me, though…."

The shrouded figure raised one hand, as if in mock confusion. "Oh? *Grum grum*, what could bother the mighty John Henry? The steel-driving man, isn't that what they call you?"

I didn't like the tone in the growly voice, and the alarms going off inside my mind grew louder. Anansi put a finger to his lips to keep me quiet. Was he trying to identify the stranger?

"Well," John Henry said with a drawl, "we're on the highest floor of this here palace, protected by my powers and those of Rose and Sarah. Even old Nyame put his wards in place. Them statues? The sky god had them set up to alert me, in case something evil comes outta that sea again." He faced the visitor. "And you know what's strange? Ever since you stepped in here, *every single one of them has been screaming in my ear.*"

The folk hero leaned forward, his palms out and an odd expression on his face. Hurt? Betrayal?

"What have you done?" John Henry asked.

The other person's hand fell, and a heavy sigh sounded. For one second I thought it was a sign of remorse.

The leader of MidPass must've thought the same thing, because he lifted his hands to his face, exhaustion still weighing on him.

And at that moment, the shadowy hand moved to the handle of the hammer.

That's when I realized how wrong I was.

The only remorse that mysterious figure had was for what they were about to do.

The stranger's hand lifted the hammer high in the air, and the cloak's hood slipped off for the first time. I could see the head clearly…and I wished I hadn't. What I'd thought was armor, or a metal of some sort, was

even worse. I'd seen it before, in Alke. And more recently, in my nightmares. Every night.

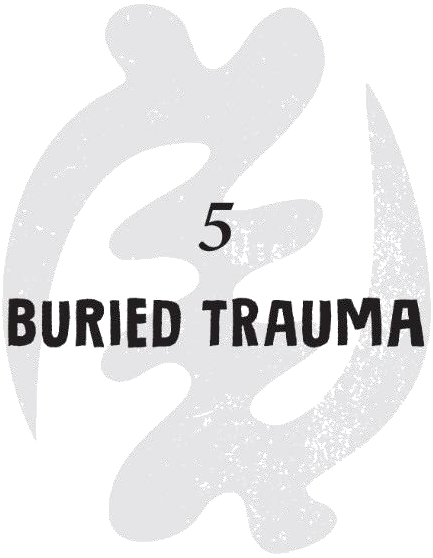
It was the snarling head of an iron monster. A bossling.

"JOHN HENRY!" I screamed.

The giant folk hero flinched, then looked up. His eyes met mine. "Tristan?"

A growl ripped through the phone's speaker and I realized I shouldn't have drawn John Henry's attention. I'd distracted him. Left him vulnerable. His head was turned, and now—

The monster swung the hammer down in a vicious arc, and the screen went black.



# 5
# BURIED TRAUMA

**“TRISTAN? YOU ALL RIGHT, BABY?”** *He’s coming.*

*Bosslings. Fetterlings. Brand flies. Hullbeasts.*

*He’s coming.*

I couldn’t see the spirits, but their voices were still ringing in my head, swirling around my worry about John Henry. Was the big guy okay?

“Tristan?”

*He’s coming, he’s coming, he’s coming. Beware, beware, he’s coming. The Shamble Man is coming. The Shamble Man. THE SHAMBLE MAN!*

“TRISTAN!”

I looked up. Nana stood in front of me, a flour-dusted apron hanging around her neck and both hands on her hips as she waved a dough-covered spatula at me. I sat at the old wooden table in the kitchen, the SBP facedown in front of me and the smell of baking rolls in the air. A sheen of sweat gleamed on Nana’s brow from the combined heat of the oven and the summer day.

“Sorry, Nana,” I said. “What’d you say?”

“Hmph. I saaaid, are you all right? You sitting there like you done lost your puppy.” Nana squinted at me over her glasses before she turned back to the rolls rising on the counter. She checked them, then opened the oven and slid the pan next to the two other trays browning inside. The smell washed over me and my stomach grumbled. Nana snorted. “At least your

appetite is acting normal. I'm over here telling you this story, and you ain't even listening."

I'd asked Nana to help me document more stories. You know, so I could do what I was supposed to do as an Anansesem. Whenever she thought of a good one, I'd grab a seat and turn on the Listen Chile app and record our culture. It felt good to do that, you get me? Like I was helping to keep our history alive.

Unfortunately, the events of the last hour had me shook. Literally. My hands fumbled with the phone as I tried to pause the recording app.

"I'm sorry, Nana, which one were we doing?"

My grandmother started rolling out another batch of dough and pursed her lips. "Anansi and the moon. The one where his sons saved his behind after his mouth ran up a check it couldn't cash. Trouble Seer, Road Builder, River Drinker, Skinner…Now, what were the names of those last two boys of his?"

As Nana muttered to herself, my mind wandered again. *The Shamble Man.* It sounded like someone straight out of my nightmares. I shuddered. Was that who had attacked John Henry…? How was I supposed to help? What could I do?

"Stone Thrower and Ground Pillow, that's it. Hey! You woolgatherin' again?" A piece of dough hit my forehead and I blinked. Nana was staring at me, a larger ball of the floury stuff in her hands. "What's wrong with you? Thought my grandbaby would be happy, putting that huge boy on his behind like that. Walter sure ain't stopped crowing about it. And if he don't get in here and help me with this meal, I'm gonna put him on *his* behind."

That brought a smile to my face. We were hosting Reggie and his team along with some of the neighbors for dinner, a friendly get-together for a (not so) friendly sparring match. Roasted chicken, rolls, vegetable lasagna for vegetarians, and Nana's famous and award-winning key lime pie for dessert. It should have been the highlight of the day. But…

My smile faded, and the anxiety returned.

Was John Henry okay? Who was his attacker? The image of the bossling clutching the hammer in its shackle hands sent shivers down my spine. The rusted-iron color, the jagged maw…I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to slow my breathing.

The table creaked, and when I opened my eyes, Nana sat across from me, concern on her face.

“You got something you need to talk about?” she asked.

I hesitated. What could I say? The magical world that I’d brought to the brink of disaster and then saved might be in trouble again? And I felt powerless to help?

“Tristan?”

I took a deep breath. “I…I’ve been having bad dreams, Nana. Really bad. About…something that happened before, and I guess I’m scared it might happen again.” That wasn’t exactly a lie. A generalization, maybe, but it was still true.

Nana nodded. “You wanna tell me what your nightmare is about?” I opened my mouth, then closed it, and she patted my hand. “It’s all right. You don’t have to if you don’t want to. But talking about it with someone might help. Isn’t that what your therapist back north said?”

I nodded. “Mr. Richardson. Yeah, I mean, yes. He said to talk about it slowly, or in pieces, if I wasn’t ready to talk about the whole thing.”

“Exactly. ’Cause it sounds like you’ve gone through some trauma.” “Trauma?”

Nana squeezed my hand and then got up to check the rolls in the oven. “Yes, baby. Trauma. A rough patch in your life. Something that deeply distressed you. Can be physical or emotional, or a combination of the two.” She pinched off a piece of dough, rolled it between her hands until it was really long and thin, and then laid it on the flour-covered table. “Say this is how your life normally looks. Well, something traumatic can do this.” She smooshed a portion of the dough snake in the middle with her thumb, so it was flat. “Or it can do this.” She pulled a different section into a sharp spike. “And part of what makes trauma so difficult is the period afterward. Figuring out why you’re hurting, and how you can heal…. There’s no easy solution, baby. But at some point, you might have to talk about it, even if it’s to yourself. Especially if it’s to yourself. Sometimes we can be our own worst obstacles to healing. Understand?”

I studied the dough snake and nodded slowly. Sometimes I felt like that squashed part, as if the weight of the world—*two* worlds!—were pressing down on me. And other times were more like that spike….

“Nana,” I said slowly. “Can a whole bunch of people experience trauma at the same time?”

A sad smile crossed her face. “Of course, baby. Sometimes an evil will rock a community, strip their will and feeling right from them, until they’re

raw and bleeding and hurting, inside and out. Tulsa, Oklahoma. Ferguson, Missouri. Oh yes, baby, a whole city can hurt all at once."

"And…how does a city like that—I mean, how do they all heal?"

Nana sighed. "Well, it's like I said, just on a larger scale. At some point, it needs to be talked about."

I thought about the spirits in the barn. The horror on their faces. They'd fled from something—something that had affected them all. I clenched my fists. I needed to talk to them.

I was an Anansesem, after all. Finding and carrying other people's stories was sort of my thing.

"Thanks, Nana," I said, scooting back from the table, my jaw set with determination. "That really helped."

"Of course, sugar. Now, before you slink away, scrub some of these dishes. Then find your grandfather and tell him he better come and help. Ain't no maids here." Nana raised an eyebrow and I grinned.

"Yes, ma'am."

Grandmothers. They're the best.

When I reached the barn, however, the motivation I'd gained by talking to Nana faded away. A few people, including Reggie and his trainer, still lingered around the boxing ring, talking. Granddad was there, too, and I hesitated. I didn't want them to see what I planned on doing.

The tingling feeling started up again immediately after I crossed the threshold—so strong, I nearly flinched—as if imploring me to hurry up. I didn't see any spirits, but Reggie's eyes immediately locked with mine and a frown crossed his face.

"Ignore him," Anansi said. His voice spoke softly through my earbuds. "Focus, boy."

I inhaled deeply and moved to the far corner. Reggie's gaze followed me…until his trainer tapped his shoulder. He turned around, and I took advantage of the opportunity to duck behind a stack of crates. I pulled aside a dusty burlap sack to reveal a small spade and a patch of dirt slightly darker than the surrounding packed floor.

Anansi whistled in my ear. "You were serious. You really did bury it. I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

“I’m impressed that a so-called hero would do so much to shirk his responsibility. Astounding.”

The comment stung, but I bit back the retort I wanted to make and instead grabbed the spade and started digging. I paused every few seconds to make sure no one was coming over. Not sure how I would explain this. *Oh yeah, I just buried this jewelry I received from gods in another realm, no biggie.*

*THUNK!*

The spade hit something solid. I widened the shallow hole, scraped away loose clods of dirt, then reached down and pulled out a cloth-covered box. When I slid the covering away, Anansi scoffed in my ear.

“Really? That was the best you could do? You receive the blessings of some of the most powerful gods in existence and you hide them, bury them, in *this*?”

“Hey,” I whispered in protest. “It’s all I had on such short notice. Besides, it’s waterproof.”

“But the insult. The disgrace!”

I brushed away a few specks of dirt from the multicolored plastic case and patted it gently. “You’re just jealous. You wish you had a lunch box as glorious as this one. Now hush, you’re going to get me in trouble.” I unlatched the clasp and opened the old Darkwing Duck lunch box. I’d had it for years, ever since the grandson of one of Nana’s friends had given it to me while snickering. Kids.

Inside, on top of a wadded-up towel I’d hoped Nana would never notice missing from her untouchable stack of “good linens,” lay a corded leather bracelet with several adinkra charms fastened to it. A spider’s web, representing Kwaku Anansi. It gave my stories power and also warned me when trouble was near. The crossed swords of the akofena, for when I needed to defend several places at once. Gye Nyame, the sky god’s symbol, helped me tell the difference between illusion and reality. The Amagqirha’s glimmering bead from Isihlangu enabled me to see spirits.

And flanking them all were the gloves John Henry had given to me. Fingerless, made of thin, worn brown leather, and branded with the sign of a hammer just below the knuckles, they didn’t look like much. But they were imbued with incredible strength. I pulled them on, flexed my fingers, and smiled. Then I slid on the bracelet. The tingling sensation I’d been feeling exploded into a rippling wave of electricity that washed over me. A

thunderous chorus of drums erupted in my ears. The rhythm pounded my bones and shook my soul. I grinned. It felt good. But my grin quickly faded as the spirits' rush of emotions returned even stronger. The worry. The terror. The desperation.

*Please…*

*He's coming!*

*The Shamble Man is coming.*

*You have to help!*

I had to talk to them, and quickly, before this Shamble Man, whoever he was, hurt anyone else. But where were they?

"If you're quite finished with your dramatic reveal, could we please hurry up to the part where we actually do something?" Anansi asked impatiently.

I got to my feet. "Says the god famous for being lazy. Besides, I can't do anything while Reggie—"

A voice interrupted me. "Can't do anything while Reggie what?" "Busted," whispered Anansi.

I turned to find Reggie towering over me, glaring, his bare hands balled into loose fists. His eyes dropped to the hole in the ground, then took in the lunch box, and a scowl crossed his face.

"You talking trash behind my back while you're digging in the dirt and playing pretend? Some boxer. The world-famous Strong Gym, huh? Can't believe I wasted my time coming here. Could've shadowboxed and done better."

Hot anger swept aside my embarrassment at being caught with the lunch box. "I still knocked you down."

"Luck, that's all."

"Yeah, losers always say that."

Reggie's eyes narrowed. "What did you call me?"

I started to take a step forward, but the tingling sensation swept over me again. Right. Priorities. "Look, I don't have time for this. Why don't you go eat—my nana cooked for everyone—and we'll just forget we ever met." I tried to step past him to go where the voices seemed to be coming from, but Reggie slid over and blocked me.

He stuck a finger in my face. "I don't need your grandmother's trash cooking, and I don't need your trash hospitality. Understand?" He poked my chest.

The barn door opened. Nana stepped inside, her quilting bag in one hand, the other hand on her hip. “Walter? Y’all gonna come set the table, or am I eating by myself? Out here jibber-jabbering. Them green beans ain’t gonna snap and sauté themselves, either. I told Tristan to come get you. Tristan! Didn’t I tell you—?”

*They’re coming!*

Nana suddenly stopped talking, as if she’d heard the voices as well. But I didn’t have a chance to think about that, because Reggie sneered and stabbed me one more time with his finger. “Why don’t *you* go eat…*your mudpies*,” he said with a snicker.

That did it.

I shoved the larger boy in the chest with one hand. Just one hand, I swear!

Reggie flew backward across the barn, and for the second time today, landed on his backside. This time it wasn’t at my feet, but a dozen yards away.

“The gloves,” Anansi hissed in my ear.

Sweet peaches, I was wearing John Henry’s *gloves*!

I stepped forward, ready to apologize, but it was too late. Reggie slammed his hands against the ground and climbed to his feet. With the look on his face, he could’ve been arrested for attempted murder. He sprinted forward with his fists up, ignoring the shouts of Tony the Trainer and Granddad. The giant boy came closer and closer until he was within striking distance, then lunged forward, his right fist arcing toward my head. I knew that if that punch connected, I was a goner. I ducked, then realized the truth.

It was a feint.

An uppercut rose through the air, aimed right at my chin.

*Good-bye, world,* I thought, closing my eyes and bracing for impact.

# 6
# GHOST CATS

**I WAITED AND WAITED, AND…**

Nothing.

A cold wind swept through the room.

The noise faded away, like someone had turned down the volume knob on the world. I opened my eyes and looked around, confused, but what I saw didn't make any sense. Nearly everything in the barn had gone completely still. Reggie was frozen in mid-lunge, a snarl etched on his face. A mosquito hovered inches above Tony the Trainer's nose, getting ready to chow down. The man himself had his cheeks puffed out and his eyes crossed, in the middle of blowing his whistle to stop the fight after the haymaker landed. Two of the spectators were frozen in mid-laugh, both of them clutching their bellies with their heads thrown back. And one older man had his back sort of turned, shielding himself from the others, his index finger shoved so far up his nose he could probably smell his knuckle.

"What is going on?" I whispered under my breath.

Something fluttered in the corner of my eye and I sighed, thankful for *some* movement. It was the river spirit…. But how was I able to see her without using Anansi's filter? Wait…the bracelet! I must have activated the spirit bead.

The girl stared directly at me, her eyes wide and her mouth working in a silent shout. She raised her arm and pointed with the universally understood signal for *Behind you!*

A cat stood in the middle of the ring, its tail swishing angrily from side to side. No, there were two of them! They weren't ordinary cats, either.

Each was as big as a rottweiler. Matted brown fur covered them from the tops of their ears to the tips of their tails, and two large fangs extended down from their upper jaws, making them look like saber-toothed tigers. But that wasn't the scariest part.

I could see right through them. They were spirits, too.

The cats had the biggest, brightest white eyes I'd ever seen. I mean they were huge, like the size of my fists. At the moment, those eyes were focused on Nana, sitting on a bench behind me. She wasn't frozen—she was…quilting?

I took a step forward. The cats whipped their heads around, and I stopped when I heard, "Don't. Move."

Nana's voice cracked like a whip. She was stitching so fast it looked like she was twirling her needle like a miniature baton. The spool of thread in her lap got thinner and thinner while the quilt she was working on grew in a dazzling golden pile at her feet. The cats were mesmerized by it. Mangy tails swished, and wide, unblinking eyes followed every movement Nana made.

Wait a minute.

Nana could move? She could talk? And she could see the cats? "Nana—" I started, but she cut me off. "I'll explain later, child."

"But…"

"Later! Right now we've got to take care of these ole Murder Whisker twins. I can keep them distracted for now, but I'm running out of this here special thread."

I felt Nyame's adinkra pressing against my wrist. The sky god's charm helped me see the stories that made up the world around us. I hadn't used it since returning to good old Alabama, but something about Nana's "special thread" made me think…

I closed my eyes. After a second, maybe two, I opened them.

"Sweet peaches…"

Nana's thread blinded me with its dazzling brilliance. The spool was a blaze of copper and bronze, and she cradled her project in her arms as if she were swaddling the sun. Words moved along the stitches, but I couldn't look at them long enough to read them, not without three pairs of sunglasses. I closed my eyes again and shook my head to clear the afterimages. I'd always known Nana was full of surprises, but—

“C’mon, child, ain’t no time for dawdlin’.” Nana stared at me over her horn-rimmed glasses. “I need your help.”

Look, when your grandmother says she needs your help, you don’t ask why or for how long. You jump to attention and get ready to go to work, no matter what she asks. That’s what grandchildren are supposed to do.

She nodded at a bucket sitting on the floor just outside the ropes of the ring. “Grab a handful of them rags when I say so. Count of three, you throw them as hard as you can at those things. You hear me?”

I looked at the faded blue bucket. Granddad used the dented plastic container to hold dirty, sweaty, funky towels that boxers and trainers discarded. It was supposed to be emptied into the washer after every training session, but in all the hype and commotion around this sparring session, I guess I’d forgotten. So it was filled to the brim with damp nastiness.

“Uh…” I said.

“Don’t fix your lips to say anything other than ‘Yes, ma’am,’” Nana warned. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “Hurl funk at the felines. Got

it.” “Good. Here we go, now. One. Two. THREE!”

I took off. Head down, arms pumping. I dodged the frozen spectators, avoided Reggie, then slid next to the overflowing bucket and grabbed it. I hoisted it over my head with both hands and turned around, ready to toss the contents with all my might. I didn’t know how it was supposed to work, but if Nana wanted me to throw stinky laundry at the cats, then that’s what I was going to do.

At least, I’d planned to.

But then Nana stood up. She reached out, sewing project in her hands, and spread her arms wide. When the quilt unfurled, I felt my heart swell. The large blanket shone with a steady light. Within glimmering squares of ivory-white fabric, Nana had used her special thread to stitch a variety of magnificent patterns. When combined, they formed an entire landscape portrait of…

“Our farm,” I whispered.

The house stood in the middle, along with the barn we were standing in now. There was the cornfield behind it, a golden-brown color that seemed to shift the more I looked at it, like stalks blowing in the wind. A river of

words circled the quilt's border. Bright blue and shining silver, they rippled as I read them.

*I was born in the shallows of a mighty river,*
*Or in the maelstrom,*
*Or in the hurricane,*
*Or in the lakes of the people.*
*I am—*

"Tristan!" Nana's shout dragged me back to the present, and I realized my mistake. The spirit cats had dropped into a crouch and their tails swished angrily, like twin lionesses ready to pounce. You know what I mean. That thing where a cat is ready to attack and destroy your ankle and there's nothing you can do to stop it.

Except in this case the cats were monsters/haints/ghosts/all of the above, the size of attack dogs, and instead of an ankle, it looked like they wanted to maul my grandmother.

Not on my watch.

"Now, Tristan!"

The cats sprang forward and I flung the bucket at them. The balled-up towels tumbled out and I wrinkled my nose. Those things stank—the odor hit me like a sucker punch to the nostrils. And when they hit the cats, the spirits reacted like they'd been scalded with hot oil. They both jumped, each opening its mouth in a silent yowl, then starting to twitch in midair before collapsing on the ground.

I ran forward, eager to put the finishing stomp on the terrifying tabbies, but Nana's shout stopped me in my tracks.

"Don't, boy! This ain't over yet."

Too late.

A sudden peal of thunder shook the whole barn, just as the ghost cats flipped onto their paws and, as one, launched themselves at me. Their shining eyes pinned me in place. I screamed, expecting to feel a burst of pain at any moment as they clawed me to pieces.

Just when it appeared I was doomed, a golden blur zipped past me toward the cats, so bright I had to close my eyes. The scent of ozone—that lingering smell after a lightning strike or electric shock—floated beneath my nose.

"Sweet peaches," I muttered. "I'm getting too old for this."

I heard a groan and opened my eyes. I couldn't believe what I saw. Nana sat on the floor near the spot where the cat spirits used to be, her quilt in tatters at her feet. That explained the blur—my grandmother must have thrown the glowing blanket over those monsters.

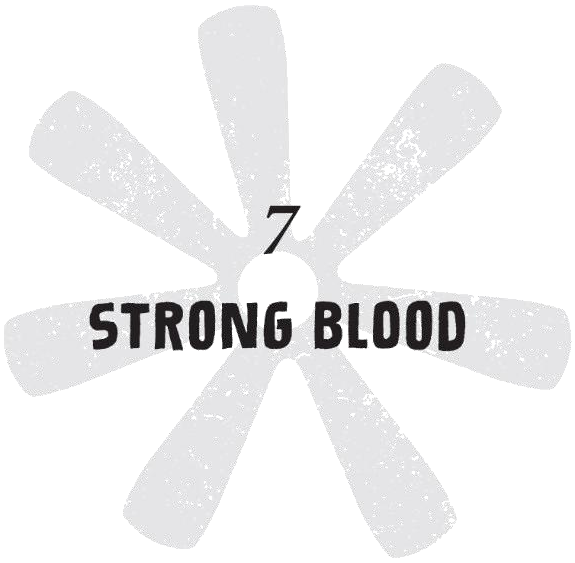
As the quilt dimmed slowly like a dying candle, the other people in the barn came back to life. With me out of the way, Reggie lunged at nothing and fell on his face. Tony the Trainer blew his whistle while swatting at the mosquito. The spectators finished laughing abruptly, as if they'd forgotten what was so funny.

Meanwhile, Nana stared at me with a peculiar expression. Confusion? Sadness? Understanding? Frustration? Maybe a combination of all four.

"It's about time you and I had a talk," she said in a hoarse voice. She frowned at the sound of her own words, then sighed and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and tried to stand. But when she got to her knees, Nana's face contorted, and she let out a hiss of pain. My heart jumped into my throat. She dropped back onto the ground, sending torn pieces of quilt scattering like dead leaves as she clutched her chest.

"Nana!" I shouted and scrambled to her side.

"Get…Walter," she whispered, and her eyes fluttered shut.



# 7
# STRONG BLOOD

**REGGIE'S RING DOCTOR AND GRANDDAD STEPPED OUT OF MY** grandparents' bedroom. Quietly. Carefully. The way adults do when something *serious* has happened and they don't want to talk about it in front of kids, so they exchange Looks and tiptoe to another room.

The doctor was a short and stocky Afro-Latina with curly black-and-brown hair pulled into a bun. Her small medical kit had the name ALMEIDA TORRES stitched on the side, and she flashed me a warm smile before murmuring to Granddad in the hallway. I was sitting on the large fluffy couch in the middle of the living room, my fingers tracing the flowers on the dust cover, my bare feet slowly sliding back and forth over the plush area rug.

Thunder boomed in the distance. No rain or lightning yet, but with the dark clouds gathering outside, it felt like one was going to unleash its fury any minute now. As if we needed this day—evening, I guess—to get any worse.

After Nana fell, Reggie and his trainer had helped us carry her into the house on a bench. That had been several hours ago, and since then I hadn't moved from the couch. I couldn't.

"She's going to be fine," I heard Dr. Torres say quietly to Granddad. "It was more exhaustion than anything—some stress as well. She needs to rest. That's important. Lots of rest, and I put in a prescription for her blood pressure."

Granddad seemed to sink into himself. I'd never seen him look so haggard, so…so unsure. He kept wringing his hands slowly, carefully, as if there was something clinging to them and it was dogging him relentlessly. "But she's gonna be all right, you said?" he asked. "I mean…she's gonna be fine?"

"Yes, Mr. Strong. But she needs rest. Also, have you thought of…" Their voices trailed off as the two moved into the kitchen. I watched the empty hallway for a few moments, then looked at Nana's door, which was open a crack. It wasn't fair. She'd gotten hurt while trying to protect me from something I should've been able to take care of myself. I was the Anansesem; I had the adinkra bracelet from the gods of Alke. I was so upset, I started talking to myself. "If I hadn't flinched, if I hadn't frozen, if I —"

"You're doing it again," came a small voice.

The SBP rested on my lap. Anansi reclined on the Contacts app icon and swung his six legs like a child. His floppy hat was pulled down over his eyes and he was nodding gently to a beat only he could hear. When I didn't say anything, he lifted his hat with one finger and shook his head. "That thing you do where you make everything about you. It's not your fault, boy."

"But she was trying to save me," I whispered.

He shrugged. "Most people would have. Okay, I know a few who would've just watched you suffer without lifting a finger. But that's not your grandmother. She saw someone in trouble, someone she loved dearly, and she acted. I've seen you do similar things."

"Not when I needed to most," I said bitterly. "And those…whatever those creatures were—they could still be out there somewhere, waiting to attack us again. We need to figure out what's going on, Anansi. Everything's falling to pieces and I don't know why. If only I could've—"

"You know," Anansi said, talking right over me, "ifs are pretty powerful. You can collect them like a lazy man collects excuses. If this, if that. If I can't, if I could. Better watch it, little storyteller, or you'll build yourself a wall of ifs you can't get around. Now, ever since you gave me more permissions, I've been digging around in this here Story Box Phonogram—"

"Phone," I muttered.

“—and I’ve managed to cook up some interesting things. Which shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone, of course.”

“Of course.”

“I’ve got something that’s going to spice up your soup, you just watch.” I wrinkled my brow suspiciously.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Anansi said, making an innocent face. “I’m trying to help, honest! I’m a web developer, after all.”

My brow wrinkled even further. It probably looked like someone had balled up my forehead like a piece of trash.

Anansi raised his right hand. “I promise, young Anansesem, I have only the purest intentions. I just need a little more time. Let me do my thing and work my magic, and I’ll have a web app hopping like ole Frog did when I told him I’d bought him a brand-new hot tub.”

I rolled my eyes, then squinted. “Fine. Hey, wait…Where’s your other spider-arm?”

He cleared his throat and pulled it from behind his back. I shook my head. He’d probably had his fingers crossed the whole time. You can never trust a trickster god. But at this point, who else could I rely on?

A cough sounded from Nana’s bedroom. After a second, another one came, and I dropped the phone on the couch and tiptoed over to the door. I peeked inside, but couldn’t see anything, because it was so dark.

“Hello?” Her feeble voice rang out, followed by another cough. “Is anyone there? I need some water. Let me just—”

I heard the bed creak, and I quickly pushed the door open wider. “Nana, you’re not supposed to get up! You have to rest!”

“Tristan? Is that you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll get you some water, hold on.” I walked to the kitchen, ready to explain what I was doing to Granddad and Dr. Torres, but it was empty. They were out on the front porch. The doctor was pointing at the sky, a worried look on her face. I grabbed a glass, filled it with some water, then hurried back to Nana.

I paused before I entered. I rarely went into my grandparents’ bedroom, out of respect for their privacy. (And maybe Nana’s leaning tower of hatboxes by the door scared me. Seriously. She had more hats than I had sneakers, and *that* was saying something.) It smelled of antiseptic and Granddad’s aftershave. Nana sat up on their queen-size bed, pillows propping her upright as if she were sitting in a chair.

She smiled at me when I handed her the cup. “Thanks, baby,” she said. When I turned to go, she reached out and touched my arm. “Set yourself down and stay awhile. I expect we need to talk about a few things.”

I’d been hoping she would say that. “Really? About what?” I did my best to imitate Anansi and smiled innocently.

Nana’s stare could’ve melted ice cream and stripped paint off a wall. “You really gon’ try that on me?” she asked.

I hung my head. “No, ma’am.”

“Good.” She took a sip, then another, and sighed. “Used to be a couple li’l old cats weren’t nothing. They should’ve been a breeze for me to take care of.”

“I’m sorry, Nana,” I said in a low voice. “They were coming for me, and I froze.”

“Shoot, boy, ain’t no need for you to be feeling sorry for yourself. One plat-eye is more than I expect someone to handle on their own the first time, let alone two.”

“One what?”

“Plat-eye. That’s what your great-grandmother called them. She was born over on the Sea Islands.” Nan shifted, straightening her back, and I smothered a smile. Sick or not, she was going to tell her story.

“Plat-eyes are spirits that still need something done. Can’t move on until they get it resolved. Might be treasure they buried, or a wrong they committed, or any number of things. Most of them are harmless, but you gotta be careful with them—that’s why I stepped in. Them things will change shape and grow and haunt you until you can’t take it no more.”

“Wait. Change shape and grow? Are they Pokémon?”

Nana looked down her nose and over the top of her glasses. “Pokey-what?”

“Never mind.”

She blinked, then sniffed. “As I was *saying…*the only way to get rid of a plat-eye, if you don’t know how to solve its problem, is to keep something foul on you at all times. In the old days, folks would’ve used gunpowder, but it looks like a grandson’s sweat towels work just as well.”

“So they’re gone for good?” I asked hopefully, but my shoulders slumped when Nana shook her head.

“No, child, we just shooed ’em away for a bit. If they were looking for you, they’ll be back in a different form next time, but you’ll recognize

them.” Nana tapped the side of her glasses. “The eyes. They can’t change them eyes.”

She leaned over the side of the bed, looked down at the fragments of her quilt in the bag on the floor, and sighed.

“I’ll help you fix that,” I said.

Nana smiled. “Sometimes there ain’t no fixing something, baby. If you wanna rebuild, you gotta break it down and start all over. Might seem hard, but it’s the only way if you wanna get it right.”

I helped her sit back on her pillow. “Nana, why do you think those plat-eyes were looking for me?”

“You know why,” she said. “’Cause you could see ’em, hear ’em.” “But so could you….”

“There’s something special about you,” Nana continued, as if she hadn’t heard me. “Known it since you was born, child. You got Granddad’s and my blood running through your veins—Strong blood. What is it you kids say? Game recognize game.”

I rolled my eyes. “No one says that anymore, Nana.”

“Well, they should. Soon as I catch up to the slang, y’all go and change it. Rude children. But yes, I’ve always known that you were special. I also know the places you been, the people you’ve talked to.”

“You do?”

Nana nodded and leaned closer. “Alke.”

The word started as a whisper and grew into a gust that stirred the blankets. A shiver of excitement rippled down my spine. Finally, someone in this world who could understand what I’d been through, what I’d seen!

“Nana, this is incredible!” I whisper-shouted. “Have you been to the Golden Crescent? Or Isihlangu? Did they let you in the front door, or did you have to pretend to be trash, like I did? And the stories! Is that where you got your stories?”

Nana laughed. “Easy, child, easy. Yes, I got a few stories from them. Left quite a few behind, too. Can’t help it—all of Alke is a story. You should know that by now. Didn’t you see the special thread I was using?”

I started to ask another question, but just then the bedroom door opened and Granddad stepped in. He flicked on the light and I stood up quickly. His eyes were red and he was still wringing his hands. “Okay, Tristan, that’s enough. Your grandmother needs her rest.”

His tone brooked no argument, so I kissed Nana on the forehead and headed out. As I crossed the threshold, she called out to me.

“Tristan, remember what I said, now. You got Strong blood. Whatever comes calling, you remember that.”

I nodded, then shut the door. I headed toward my own room and then stopped.

Strong blood. Plat-eyes. Spirits needing help.

Enough was enough.

It was time for the Anansesem to do his job.

# 8
# THE MAN IN THE IRON-MONSTER MASK

**I STEPPED INTO THE BARN WITH A FLASHLIGHT ON AND ALL MY** Anansesem powers active. My ears thrummed as the world sang around me. My reflection appeared in a mirror Granddad had mounted on the wall for shadowboxing, and what I saw made me pause.

A tall Black boy, hoodie pulled over his head, with glowing golden eyes.

I shivered and then, holding the flashlight in one hand and the ancestral bead from my bracelet in the other, scanned the barn. The place was empty…except for something shimmering in the corner. The river spirit. I'd half expected the girl to be gone like the rest, but she still floated there, staring at me with a pleading expression, and this time I didn't ignore it.

I put an overturned bucket on a bench and propped the SBP on top of it, opening the camera so Anansi could join our conversation. The more I focused on her, the brighter the spirit girl seemed to flare.

"Please," came her faint voice. "Please, he's coming. You have to save her."

A bright blue aura surrounded her transparent body. Not the blue of a clear sky, or the blue of the ripe berries that Nana baked into her pies. No, it was more of a bluish green, the color of lakes and seas and oceans, and her outline was the white of rushing rapids. Her dress and braids gently swirled around her as if she were floating in water at that very second.

"Who are you?" I finally asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Turquoise eyes studied mine. “Ninah. I am called Ninah. And I need your help, and the help of the tiny god you’ve trapped.”

“I’m not trapped,” Anansi protested. “I’m one of them virtue assistants. Tell her, Tristan.”

“You mean *virtual* assistant. But that’s not important. Ninah,” I said, turning back to the spirit. “How did you get here? Is there another tear between our worlds? You aren’t here to steal something from me, are you?” A certain sap-covered doll baby came to my mind. “I swear, I need an Alkean alarm system.”

Ninah shook her head. “River spirits do not steal, Anansesem. We give and we heal. But yes, I arrived as the others did, through a seam. But that doesn’t matter. Someone has taken her, and we need you to get her back. Only you have the power and knowledge to do so.”

I couldn’t help it. My back straightened and I stood a bit taller. Anansi smirked. “Pardon me, spirit of the river, but you keep mentioning ‘her.’ Who exactly has been taken from your home in the Grasslands? And—no offense, boy—why is Tristan uniquely equipped to perform this rescue?”

The river spirit looked surprised. “Because he holds the Story Box. He has the blessings of the gods of Alke. He is the Anansesem, and the hero of the Battle of the Bay.”

“Is that what they’re calling it now?” I muttered.

“Hmm.” Anansi stroked his chin. “I’ll come back to that undeserved praise. But you still haven’t mentioned *who* was taken.”

Have you ever seen a spirit sigh? Their aura fades a little. I was suddenly more aware of how faint Ninah was. It must have been taking great effort on her part to stay there and talk to me, and I felt guilty. But that emotion disappeared when she spoke again.

“The Shamble Man took my mother,” she said softly.

The SBP vibrated, startling me. Anansi was pacing back and forth, and the screen was flashing. “Your mother?” he asked. His voice was loud, almost as if he were standing right next to us. “Is she—?”

Ninah shook her head again—sadly this time. “I don’t know.”

I looked between the two. They knew something I didn’t. Anansi glanced at me with an expression that said *Later.*

I scratched my head. “I don’t even know who this Shamble Man is.”

Again I wondered whether he was the one who had attacked John Henry. If

so, I couldn't take him on by myself…. "Or where he's taken your mother. Are they in Alke? With my grandmother sick, I'm not sure I should be leaving right now…."

"But that's just it." Ninah looked from me to the phone, where Anansi sat in his web. "There's no time left."

A chill ran down my spine. "What do you mean?"

"He's on his way. The Shamble Man is coming *here*."

Her words punched me in the gut harder than Reggie had earlier. I stumbled back a few steps and collapsed on the bench. A thundering roar filled my ears. It felt like a storm was surging around me, and my fists were clenched so hard I thought my fingernails would pierce my palms.

"Tristan."

When I raised my eyes, I saw that Anansi and Ninah were both staring at me. No, they were staring at what was floating in midair in front of me: four gleaming black boxing gloves with emblems of crossed swords. The akofena, the Swords of War, had come to life. Okay, then.

I stood and took a deep breath. "What do I have to—? OUCH!"

Something had burned my wrist, like that time I brushed against my mother's flatiron before church. Searing pain.

"Oh no." I looked down at the adinkra bracelet dangling at the end of my arm.

Anansi and Ninah hadn't been staring at the floating gloves.

The very first adinkra I'd received, the one my best friend, the dead seventh grader now known as Tupacrates, had attached to his journal, Anansi's personal symbol…

It was glowing.

"Iron monsters," I whispered.

My nightmare had been ripped out of my head and given life.

There were two versions. In scenario number one, I'm at some sort of public event and everyone's looking at me. Maybe it's a school assembly, or a talent show, or that one time Nana took me to her church and I had to lead the choir in singing the Black National Anthem and I forgot the words.

Forgot. The. Words.

Anyway.

No matter where I'm at, though, I'm missing something extremely important and vital.

Clothes.

That's right—I'm in front of a bunch of people in my tighty-whities.

Scenario number two is even worse. This nightmare started after I came back from Alke. I'm running after someone, someone I love. They're being taken from me, and I can't stop it. Sometimes the abductors are iron monsters—fetterlings or hullbeasts; other times it's King Cotton. I can be back in MidPass, in the Drowned Forest, or chasing after a school bus on an icy road, knowing what happens next. I never catch up to them…I always lose.

It repeats over and over until I wake up breathless, panicking. Nana called it trauma, and now I was reliving it. Granddad and Nana were in the house all alone, and something terrifying was about to attack the farm.

It felt like I couldn't run fast enough.

Wind lashed at my face, and the night insects seemed to cackle as they watched my desperate sprint across the hard-packed dirt. My hair stood on end as a jagged bolt of lightning hit the ground, followed by a bone-rattling thunderclap.

*BOOM!*

Wait. That wasn't thunder.

That sounded like…

I leaped up the front stairs and skidded to a stop on the wooden porch. The door had been smashed open, knocked nearly off the hinges. It was like someone had taken an ax to the farmhouse in a rage.

The lights were off inside. Shadows lurked in the hallway. I wished I hadn't left my flashlight in the barn.

"Hello?" I called.

The only response was silence. I thought I heard something moving around, but it could've just been the wind dancing past me, daring me to go in.

*Thought you were a hero, big boy.*

I filled my lungs with air and took a step forward. Then another. The moon peeked out from behind a cloud and faint light fell across my shoulders, adding my shadow to the others. I held my breath. Even the crickets outside had gone quiet. A floorboard creaked underfoot, and I winced. But nothing jumped out at me, so maybe—

"So…you are the Anansesem, *grum grum*."

I froze, my heart in my throat. The words were muffled, almost garbled, and the voice was deeper than that of anyone I knew. But I recognized it. I'd heard it during the video call with John Henry. So that *had* been the Shamble Man!

"Who's there?" I asked, hating the way my voice shook. "Come out where I can see you!"

The Shamble Man continued as if I hadn't spoken. "The hero of Alke. The savior of Isihlangu." The voice paused, then continued in a harsh growl. "The destroyer of MidPass."

An image of MidPass burning flared in my mind, friends screaming, and I closed my eyes at the sudden wave of pain.

"Yesss, the Destroyer. I like that title better, *grum grum*." The voice grew lighter, almost playful, as the intruder sang:

*"Tristan Strong punched a hole in the sky*
*And let the evil in.*
*Cities burned.*
*Now what did we learn?*
*Don't let him do it again."*

I gritted my teeth, willing myself to ignore the disturbing—and yet accurate—lyrics. "Stop hiding and come out where I can see you. Or are you scared? You just gonna shout insults while hiding?" I held up my left arm so Anansi's adinkra shone in the darkness like a tiny green star, warning me that iron monsters were near.

"'Come out,' says the little hero. 'Come out'! But does he really want me to, *grum grum*? Little man might not like what he seesss." The words ended in a hiss that swirled from the far corner, where I thought the door to Nana and Granddad's bedroom was. There, a group of shadows seemed to ripple on top of the darkness. Something thumped on the floor, shaking the house, and I thought the refrigerator had fallen over. But then it thumped again, and again. A chill swept over me when I realized that what I was hearing were the footsteps of something massive. Something…monstrous.

A figure slowly emerged. My muscles locked up and a deep chill settled in my bones as my worst fears became reality.

Two huge feet covered in fetterling chains. Arms and legs armored with the rotted wood of a hullbeast. The broken, jagged halves of a bossling's manacle-like head rested on either shoulder, and a long, tattered cloak was fastened to them. And in between the iron halves, I could now see a face…

“No,” I whimpered.

On the face was a gleaming, twisted amber mask, knotted and warped, the eye and mouth holes ringed with the crumpled insect-like bodies of brand flies.

The Shamble Man moved closer, one arm tucked into his cloak, and I took a step back without thinking. He laughed, and the mask shifted slightly. I flushed in hot anger and embarrassment, and I forced myself to hold my ground and clench my fists.

“What do you want?” I shouted.

The mask tilted, as if the wearer found the question amusing. “By grum, the little hero has some courage after all. But he keeps asking questions he might not like the answers to. Look at him shake. Look at him shiver. This is the Destroyer? He is a whelp, a child, *grum grum*.”

“I am not—”

“So eager to leap into battle,” he continued, talking right over me. “Not knowing what he risks losing.” He raised one arm to open the cloak, and in the faint light of my adinkra bracelet I saw two figures curled up in fear on the floor next to him.

Granddad and Nana.

They were holding each other, each trying their best to shield their partner in life, and when they saw me, they stiffened. Granddad struggled to his feet and put up his fists.

“Get out of my house!” he shouted at the monster.

“Walter, don’t!” Nana said. “You don’t know what—”

“I said, leave!” Granddad edged forward and threw a few jabs at the Shamble Man. But the masked intruder just chuckled, a harsh sound that filled the room with violent foreboding. Granddad bobbed and weaved, then rushed forward with a flurry of punches. I held my breath, hopeful.

An armored hand shoved my grandfather aside, and he collapsed against the far wall.

“Granddad!” I shouted. I started forward, then stopped. The Shamble Man was in my way.

“Finally, some fire. You see, little hero? There was still some pride in that one. But I’m sorry, *grum grum* , I’m not here for the old man. No, not here for him at all. There’s another whose legend is just as strong in Alke as your false epic, little hero. Someone who taught you everything she knew. Yesss,” he hissed, turning.

“No,” I whispered.

The Shamble Man pointed an armored hand at Nana.

“Here we are, *grum grum*.”

I didn’t think. My body just acted on its own. I lunged forward, desperate to get in between my grandmother and the Shamble Man, but the huge figure sprang into my way and I was forced to throw myself backward with a yelp. Something gleamed in the darkness and a thunderous crash sounded from the spot where I’d stood only a second earlier. I clenched my fists and activated the akofena adinkra, High John the Conqueror’s gift to me before the Battle of the Bay. Four obsidian black boxing gloves shimmered into view. When I swung my right fist, two of the gloves mimicked the action in a vicious hook Granddad would’ve been proud of….

Only to be batted away like flies by a whirling metallic blur. The impact spun me in a circle, and when I turned back around, I froze in confusion.

The masked intruder held something I’d never dreamed of defending myself against. I knew it on sight, had even fought alongside its owner in battle. But that was back in Alke, not in Alabama. And the last time I’d seen it, it had been swinging toward the leader of MidPass.

“Come, little hero. Let me smash you to bits.” The masked intruder held up the weapon and prepared to charge. I gulped, my eyes glued to one of the most powerful items in all Alke. A smooth wooden handle carved with symbols. Cold polished iron engraved with the adinkra symbol for strength and protection.

John Henry’s hammer.

The hammer slammed down into the floor again and again as the Shamble Man attempted to crush me in my grandparents’ kitchen. He didn’t chase me, however, and I noticed he never moved far from the doorway. He was stalling for some reason, but I didn’t exactly have the time to stop and work through that mystery.

“Why are you doing this?” I shouted as I dodged another swing. The hammer crashed into the sink, demolishing the countertop and sending water spraying into the air.

“‘Why?’ the little hero asks.” The hammer swung again, obliterating the pantry door as I ducked the wave of splintered wood fragments. One of them glanced off my cheek, stinging, and I felt something warm run down

my face. “‘Why?’ says the Destroyer. After burning the homes of thousands. Sending hundreds to lie in chains in the walls of a monster. ‘Why?’ he asks.”

“That wasn’t my fault—” I started to protest.

“NOT YOUR FAULT?!” the Shamble Man roared. John Henry’s hammer twirled above his head before he swiped at me, the iron head barely missing as it whistled past. It was starting to glow in a familiar way, and I felt I should know what that meant. But it’s hard to think when you’re dodging and ducking to save your life. The hammer head swung left and right, scraping the floor and scarring the ceiling. “Everything is your fault. Everything! So now I must do what is best for my world, for Alke, and I do it gladly.”

He lunged forward, the hammer raised, and I threw myself backward. But he had tricked me. As I tumbled head over heels, the masked intruder stepped into the hallway, scooped up Nana, and tossed her over his shoulder like she was as light as a pillow. She fought him. Somehow she’d grabbed her quilting bag and was smacking the Shamble Man upside the head with it. But it was all in vain.

“Put her down!” I screamed, scrambling to my feet. My akofena shadow gloves appeared again as I started to dash forward, but a swipe of the hammer sent me crashing into the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink.

The Shamble Man turned and pressed the head of the hammer, now glowing hot orange, against the floor of the hall and shoved it downward. A golden seam appeared. It was as if the air unzipped itself and an entrance to another world appeared. Now I remembered where I’d seen this before. John Henry and Brer Rabbit had done the same thing when they sent Gum Baby from Alke into my world. This was another tear, but smaller, controlled. Was this how the spirits were crossing into my world?

“Good-bye, little hero,” the Shamble Man said. The hood of his cloak was pulled low, but I still saw red-orange eyes brimming with hate behind the mask he wore. They glared at me with such fury, I took a step back without thinking. “May your heart wither. May your tears fall endlessly, as mine once did.”

With that, the man in the amber monster mask stepped toward the glowing seam.

“Nana!” I screamed.

My grandmother, still hammering her kidnapper upside the head, met my eyes. She mouthed something, but I couldn't understand it. My arms reached out to try to grab his swirling cloak, to try and hold him back, but the Shamble Man stepped through the seam between worlds. Behind him the golden line in the floor disappeared, leaving me stumbling to a stop.

They were gone.

# 9
# UNSPOOLING A STORY

**“TELL ME AGAIN, SLOWER THIS TIME.”**

Anansi’s stern voice cut through my panicked breathing. I was sitting on the floor of the barn where I’d left the SBP, my head between my knees. Ninah was nowhere to be seen—probably scared off by the Shamble Man. Granddad was back in the house, hollering into the phone at the police while a large welt grew on the side of his head. I’d slipped away without him noticing. I couldn’t blame him.

“Nana…” I whispered. It felt like my chest was gripped in a vise. “Tristan,” Anansi said again. The SBP vibrated in my lap to get my attention, and I looked at it through tear-blurred eyes to see the trickster god standing in his partial-spider form with two hands on his hips.

“Tell me what happened.”

I took a deep breath and tried to keep my voice steady. “He was here.” “Who?”

“Him. The one who attacked John Henry…the Shamble Man.”

A chill swept down my arms and I shivered as I continued. “He was wearing iron monsters as armor. He destroyed the farmhouse and…and… took Nana. And he did it with John Henry’s hammer.”

Anansi’s eyes grew wide. “He still has the hammer?” When I nodded, he rubbed his chin and shook his head. “So that’s what that surge of energy was. A wave of magic slammed through this place, so powerful it knocked me into full spider form for a second and dispelled the river spirit. It was incredible.” He saw the expression on my face and quickly added, “But dangerous. Very dangerous. I could tell the intent was filled with

wrongness. Wielding another god's symbol is…it's unheard of. And the armor…did you by chance get a look at it with the sun god's adinkra?" I clapped a hand to my forehead in embarrassment. "No, I didn't. Everything happened so fast."

"Hmm."

"Anansi," I said quietly.

"Yes?"

"What am I going to do? He took Nana. My grandmother! I need to go after them. I can't leave her in that monster's hands. He was so…angry, like I'd done something to him, but I've never even seen him before."

The image of my grandparents, assaulted in their farmhouse that had survived so many other tragedies, so many hard times, filled me with helpless rage. Burning tears appeared in the corners of my eyes and I cuffed them away angrily.

"Whatever *we* do, it has to be together." Anansi began pacing along the edges of the SBP's screen, walking up one side, across the ceiling, and back down the other. "This new threat is powerful. More powerful than I wanted to believe. How did he know the hammer could allow passage through the realms? What other tricks does he have up his sleeve? No, for this we need help. We need to contact the other gods and—"

"There's no time for that!" I exploded, jumping to my feet. The SBP clattered to the floor and Anansi shouted in dismay as he tumbled around the screen. "We have to go now! I need to get to Alke immediately. Nana could be hurt, and I can't sit around and wait for y'all to have a conference call! Help me get my grandmother back, please!"

Anansi sighed. "Tristan…you said that he knew everything about you. Your history, your strengths. Who your grandmother is and why she's so important to you. Have you ever stopped to think you might be doing exactly what he wants?"

"I don't care, I have to! Don't you see? I *have* to. What would you do if you were in my place?" The phone grew blurry, and I shook my head quickly to scatter my tears to the dusty floor. "Huh? Would you wait?"

"No. No, I wouldn't." Anansi rubbed his chin, and, for a brief second, a look crossed his face. An expression of remorse, or regret. Before I could ask about it, he stood up. "Okay, we'll go. But we have to be smart about this…. We're going to need help once we get there. And it's gonna take time. You need to give me a little bit more freedom—a few more unlocked

doors in this here phone—if you want to move quickly after this Shamble Man." He raised an eyebrow.

I hesitated. Giving Anansi more freedom to use the Story Box, the one thing he wanted more than anything, set off a few alarm bells in my head. But then the image of Nana disappearing in the clutches of the Shamble Man reappeared, his burning, hate-filled gaze searing my brain. I swallowed my questions and nodded. I took a deep breath, then climbed to my feet and dusted myself off. There was no time to worry. If I was going to get Nana back safely, I needed to be on my game and ready for anything.

Anansi let a wide sly grin split his face and he nodded with approval. "There we go. Nothing wrong with crying, but when you're done, it's time for action. Now, here's what I'm going to need…."

"Are you sure this is the only way?"

I walked on the dusty path that wound around the farm, circling the cornfields and heading farther and farther away from the safety and comfort of the farmhouse. It was dark outside—so dark everything looked like shadows and spilled ink. The air was cooling rapidly, and the clouds overhead were bunched on top of each other angrily, ready to send torrential rains crashing down.

That was fine.

A storm had already ripped through my life. What was a few more drops of water?

Luckily, I had the SBP on, and the glow of the screen cast a soft white light around me. I wore an old gray training hoodie, a matching pair of gray shorts, and a beat-up old pair of black-and-red Chuck Taylor sneakers. A slim backpack was slung over my shoulders, filled with water, snacks, and an old pocketknife I had found on one of the shelves in the barn. I'd even stuffed in the remains of Nana's tattered quilt—to have a part of her with me, I guess. More importantly, I wore the enchanted fingerless gloves John Henry had given me, as well as my adinkra bracelet. No way anyone was gonna catch me unprepared again.

"For the last time, boy, it's either this or nothing. Now pay attention." Anansi was crouching on the screen. He'd built a pixelated fire below the blank, rounded square of an app icon. He was in human form, and as I watched, he pulled a spool of silk from one of his pants pockets and sat down next to the fire and began to weave. Silvery thread began to spool out

behind him, curling into connected shapes that gathered in piles in the corner of the phone.

"Don't just sit there, storyteller." Anansi spoke without looking away from his work. "You're the Anansesem—I'm just a god trapped in a phone. Never mind the centuries of knowledge and skill restricted by this tiny rectangular prison, just because ole Sky God couldn't take a joke." He cleared his throat. "At any rate. I'm not bitter."

"Mm-hmm," I said.

"Do your job, boy. This doesn't work without you." "What job?" I asked, confused.

"The god—excuse me, goddess—we're attempting to summon. What, did you think I could tear open another hole between worlds? If I recall, that's *your* specialty. We're going to do things the Anansi way this time."

"Get someone else to do it?" I muttered under my breath.

"No!" the spider god snapped. Then he thought about it. "Well… actually, yes. In this case, you."

I rolled my eyes. In nearly every Anansi tale that exists, the trickster attempts to get others to do the hard work, then cheats them out of the fruit of their labors. Sometimes it's literally fruit, and other times it's fame and recognition. If there was a way Anansi could get the most while doing the least, you'd better believe he'd find it.

"I assume," Anansi continued, "you know the story of Keelboat Annie, yes? Strongest woman on the river? Go ahead and tell the tale, and I'll collect the power of your words."

I didn't really like the sound of Anansi "collecting" any power of mine, but I didn't have a choice. "Okay. I can do that, I guess." I walked on for a little bit, trying to gather my thoughts. "Okay."

"Anytime now."

I racked my brain and licked my lips. *Come on, Tristan.* Of course I'd heard about Keelboat Annie. Everyone had. I just needed to spit it out. But for some reason, trying to gather up the story felt like collecting water with a vegetable strainer. It was like I couldn't focus. As soon as I thought I was ready, the image of the Shamble Man looming over Nana flashed in my brain, and all the words and characters and images just fell out of my mind and scattered in the wind.

Anansi looked up at me and raised an eyebrow. "You *can* tell the story, can't you?"

I kicked a rock in frustration. “Yes! It’s just…I don’t know. I…I’m not feeling too good at the moment. Must be something left over from the Shamble Man.”

Anansi studied my expression. Surprisingly, he didn’t offer any wisecrack or insult. Instead, he examined the glittering net he’d woven and pursed his lips. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the net returned to a pile of silk and he started over. His body shimmered, and all of a sudden he had six arms instead of two. His additional hands moved in a blur, and the silvery strands curled across the screen.

“Words?” I asked, confused.

Anansi nodded. “Read the story as we walk. When we get there, summon the spell of activation for this symbol.”

“You mean open the app by touching the icon? Fine. And get where? Where are we going?”

Anansi cleared his throat and, for the first time, hesitated. “That ancient forest. You know…the place where we emerged from Alke.”

I stopped in my tracks as realization dawned on me.

“I assure you, my boy,” he continued quickly, “it will be fine. We will not touch the tree, nor any of the haint traps there. In fact, we’ll be on the opposite side, by the creek. Trust me. We need to be in a place of power to make this happen. It is the only way.”

*The only way.* I started walking again, slowly. The Bottle Tree forest. We were going back to the Bottle Tree forest. I had to take several deep breaths to calm myself down. It was just a forest. Only it was like a porch light for spirits ranging from troubled ghosts to devious haints. And the forest felt alive at times, as if it were watching and judging me, like Nana when I spill spaghetti sauce down my shirt. And—

“Boy, read the story.” Anansi’s voice broke into my thoughts. “We’re nearly there.”

Sure enough, the ominous treetops of the Bottle Tree forest peeked over the sloping hill I walked up. I gulped and held the SBP in front of my face, trying to focus on the words the trickster god had woven.

“‘May the stories you hear sound just as good the second time around.’” I paused and wrinkled my brow as I thought about that. Anansi kept working, but he did look up at me as his hands moved in a blur.

“You’ve got to open a story right, or don’t tell it at all. And this won’t work without some style, you understand? Some flavor. In Alke you

brought forth stories that your grandmother told you, or you created your own from your memories. Right now I need you to take someone else's story and transform it into something magical. Hear me? That's also part of being an Anansesem. Listening and keeping the stories of others to tell again at a later date. Very special. Very necessary. So don't walk all over my good name."

I nodded and cleared my throat. Read the story aloud and make it my own. I could do that. Maybe it would even help get rid of whatever was preventing me from doing my thing. I took a deep breath and began to speak.

"'They say Old Man River didn't love nobody like he loved the greatest soul to sail along the waters. And that great soul loved him back. I'm talking, of course, about Keelboat Annie.'"

As I spoke, the weirdest thing began to happen—the words untangled themselves as I said them, disintegrating into gold and copper pixels that floated over the fire onscreen before being lifted into the blank app icon above. It was like we were cooking up a tale. The story—fused with Anansi's magic, an Anansesem (me), and the power of the Story Box in its cell-phone form—built the mysterious app with every word I spoke.

And it was a doozy of a story.

# 10
# RIVERBOAT RIDESHARE

**“‘THERE ARE TONS OF STORIES FLOATING UP AND DOWN OLD MAN** River about Annie, some more incredible than others. But each and every one of them sprang from a seed of truth. If I had to start with one, if you twisted my arm and forced me to choose, it’d have to be the one that started it all. The one where Old Man River couldn’t hold her back.’”

My feet moved on their own. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was still walking, but the nighttime sounds faded away and all I could see in front of me were those swirling silver words. I knew I was still heading to the Bottle Tree forest, but the story had taken hold of me and demanded to be shared. Who was I to refuse that call?

“‘They say Annie ran a keelboat up and down Old Man River all day long, sunup to sundown. She was the only worker on that boat, and she owned it outright. She took passengers when floating downstream and fought the current with nothing but her pole when she carried cargo upstream. Now, how did she manage to do something by herself that it took four others to do in the same amount of time?

“‘Easy.

“‘Annie was the strongest person living on that side of Old Man River.’”

I could hear something. Strange sounds. The kind that didn’t belong in the middle of a farm in Alabama. It was almost like…a low splash of something entering water. Like an oar, or a pole.

“‘One day, Annie loaded up the most cargo she’d ever carried upstream. I’m talking barrels, crates, bushels, and bundles. On top of that, several families running from trouble down in New Orleans were riding as well. All them people meant it was slow going, but progress was progress, as the old folks will tell you. That is, until the keel pole snapped in half like a twig under a boot. Oh, how the children cried. That keelboat bumped and clattered its way back downstream a ways before Annie finally got it righted.

“‘But now there was a problem. She would lose good money if she couldn’t deliver that cargo, and she’d lose sleep if those families didn’t make it to their destination safely. That left one option.

“‘Annie grabbed a rope, tied it to the front of the keelboat, then jumped into the river and waded ashore. There, she wrapped it around her wrists several times, glared at Old Man River (who was surely chuckling over this turn of events), and began to *haul* the keelboat upriver.’”

The sounds around me grew louder and louder as I read. I could hear people cheering. I could feel vibrations as the small riverboat bumped against large logs and scraped over sandbars. My eyes stayed focused on the words of the story, however. The app Anansi was building was three-quarters of the way finished. I just had to keep going.

“‘Annie pulled that boat through mud and over rocks. The waters rose and still she hauled. Old Man River battered and bruised her and tried to rip the rope from her hands, but still she pulled. She bled and she ached. She heaved and she dragged. Annie willed that heap of wood upriver until her feet were sore and her back was screaming. Just her. No one helped. Everyone else was too afraid of the dangers in the water, like snakes and the current. But not Annie. She wrapped that rope around her waist and put one foot in front of the other, moving one inch at a time.

“‘Progress is progress, remember?

“‘Finally, she made it into town, and she hadn’t lost a single passenger or piece of cargo. Not one. The legend of Keelboat Annie had been born.’”

I stopped speaking, confused. The words Anansi had woven had all disintegrated, and the pixelated fire had died. Above it, the app icon was no longer blank. Instead, a deep blue boat glimmered in a silver circle. The label hovered above it.

RIVERBOAT RIDESHARE

“Well?” Anansi leaned against the side of the phone. “You planning on pressing it? We’re here.”

“We are?” I looked around and my eyes grew wide. I hadn’t even noticed. The wind chuckled as it curled around me, gusting through a shadowy opening in a stand of trees. A thick group of old trees as tall as buildings leaned in my direction, as if they were happy to see me. The Bottle Tree forest. But it wasn’t a section I remembered. I stood in a field of grass that came up to my knees. It stretched behind me to the horizon, rolling up hills and down into valleys.

“Where—?” I began to ask, but Anansi cut me off.

“No time. If we’re going to go, it has to be now. Activate the symbol and then enter the forest.”

“But—”

“Tristan, that icon isn’t going to last for long!”

Anansi was right. Even as I watched it, the shining boat icon began to fade, and the app began to lose its luster. Soon it would be a gray square again. If he was telling the truth—and that’s always a biiiig *if* with the trickster god—my shot at getting back to Alke was disappearing fast.

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “But it better not be another fiery pit in the ground. I’m running out of underwear.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said, then pressed the icon and stepped into the Bottle Tree forest. The only thing I heard was the sound of my own panicky breathing. No birds. No crickets. Everything was blanketed in a layer of silence that made me nervous beyond belief.

*Squelch*

That is, until I stepped into a trickling stream of water.

“Oh c’mon,” I said with a groan. “Why can’t I start an adventure with dry feet for once?”

I could’ve gone on complaining (trust me, I’m a highly skilled complainer), but just then a low roar echoed through the forest. It sounded like a freeway at rush hour. It shook the trees and rattled the ground. In the distance, between the branches and the leaves and the trunks, something glinted and sparkled like stars on a clear night.

The roar grew louder, and I took a step back.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Anansi said.

When I turned to look behind me, I gasped. “Where’s the farm?”

The trees crowded in around me, and there was no sign of the field or the path anywhere. Just darkness.

No, wait. There was *one* new addition.

Clouds of white mist began to creep out of the forest, covering the ground and washing over the tree bottoms. It started at my ankles, climbed to my knees, and soon I was waist-deep and too worried about tripping to move.

Turns out I didn't have to. The forest was moving for me.

The trees parted as more and more mist seeped out of the ground and swirled around us. It was as if the Bottle Tree forest was clearing the way for someone—or something—to come find us.

"Seriously?" I muttered. "This is starting to become the worst adventure I've ever been on. And I've only been on two!"

The roaring grew even louder, and with it came faint singing and a *very* familiar drumbeat.

"Um, Tristan…" Anansi said, his voice filled with worry.

"Don't *Tristan* me," I said, glaring at him. "What did that app do? Where are we, exactly?"

The spider god scratched his head. "You know, I'm not sure." "You're…you're not sure?"

"No. But, Tristan, I think you need—"

"I'm about to go Gum Baby on you."

"Turn around, NOW!"

A wave of water rushed toward us through the trees, parting the mist, ripping up the soil, and uprooting saplings. And it was wide. Wiiiiide. There was nowhere to go. The trees blocked our escape in every direction.

That was when I started screaming.

Just when it looked as if the wall of water would batter us into the trees right before it drowned us, and I was getting ready to wish my Chucks a tearful farewell, the onrushing wave dropped and sank into the ground, like someone pulled the stopper from a bathtub. It drained away until it was only ankle deep, leaving a soggy boy and a wet phone confused in a swirling mist.

"If this don't beat all," a giant voice boomed in the night.

My jaw dropped as a wooden barge as long as a bus and twice as wide emerged from the steamy fog. A woman the size of John Henry and with skin I could only describe as midnight brown stood with one foot resting on

the prow, her hands on her hips and a giant smile on her face. Someone else was behind her, but I couldn't get a good look at them because the woman threw her hands wide. She wore loose pants rolled up at the ankles and her feet were bare. A blue collared shirt was unbuttoned at the very top, and its sleeves were rolled up over massive forearms. A scarf was tied around her neck.

"Well, if it ain't the ole ghost wrassler himself." The woman jumped down off the boat, causing the ground to tremble. "How do? The name's Annie. Am I right in presuming you need to hitch a ride?"

I gawked.

At Annie, yes. But also…was that…? No, it couldn't be. "Don't mind him," a familiar voice said. The second crewperson hopped down, splashing me in the process, but I didn't care. I couldn't help it—a big goofy smile spread across my face as a short brown girl with golden bangles on each wrist and a gold-tipped staff strapped to her back folded her arms and put on a mock glare.

"He did the same thing when I first met him," Ayanna said.

# 11
# KEELBOAT ANNIE

**KEELBOAT ANNIE WAS BIG AND PROUD OF IT. HER HAIR WAS BIG**—a mass of tight curls somehow wrangled into a bun that exploded in all directions and *swished* through the air when she shook her head. Her movements were big, too. Every gesture was exaggerated, every facial expression authentic and genuine, and when she stepped forward, she did it with purpose.

But maybe the biggest thing about her was her voice.

Her laugh boomed through the forest. If her voice had a volume control, it was stuck on ten. It got down into your bones and shook them, like when you stand next to the speakers at a block party, or when your cousin with a couple of 808 speakers in the back of his Tahoe drives slowly through the neighborhood. Annie's voice was pure, loud joy.

And yet…something worried her. I could see it in the way she constantly scanned the forest. The way her eyes lingered on the shadows. Just as I was about to ask her what was wrong, she spied the light from the SBP and whistled.

"So that's where ole Web Butt snuck off to," Annie said. "We'd heard a few rumors, but seeing it up close really puts the hog on the spit, don't it? Serves him right. Serves you right!" She shouted this last sentence at Anansi, who was busy building a cocoon of silk high in the corner of the phone and hiding inside. I didn't blame him. I wouldn't want to be on Keelboat Annie's bad side, either. Her good side was scary enough. She held out her hand and I sheepishly deposited the SBP into it, and the giant

woman began to give Anansi a piece of her mind, and then a few more servings.

Ayanna jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow, dragging my attention away from the booming lecture. “You too important to speak to me now? Tuh. Big heads get bigger, I see.” But she smiled when she said it, robbing the comment of all its sting.

I smiled back. “Still upset you missed the big showdown?” When the Maafa, an ancient sentient slave ship, had attacked the Golden Crescent, MidPass’s ace raft pilot had been unconscious and in the care of the Mmoatia, the African forest fairies. It really lifted my spirits to see her back in full health.

She cocked her head. “You still afraid of heights?”

The smile dropped from my face. “That’s low.”

“Any higher and you’d be afraid of it.”

I made a rude gesture and she scowled at me. After a second we both dissolved into laughter. It was so good to see her again. Felt like old times. Too much, now that I thought about it, and my good humor faded. I sighed.

“Couldn’t get enough of us, huh?” Ayanna asked.

“I’ve, uh, got some unfinished business.” I wasn’t sure how much I should say in front of Keelboat Annie, at least not before I consulted with Anansi, and he was busy getting the lecture of a lifetime. Maybe two lifetimes.

Ayanna raised one eyebrow, and I knew she was going to ask more questions, so I beat her to the punch.

“How is everyone?”

“Fine, I guess,” she said. “Things are…well, things are fine.”

It seemed like she wasn’t in a sharing mood, either. “Why are you hanging out with Keelboat Annie?” I asked.

Ayanna grinned. “Work study. A few of us got to pair off with a god or goddess to help oversee the repairs to Alke and get experience. It was Thandiwe’s idea. She’s with High John on a mission to recruit more artists and builders from the Sands.”

I was glad to hear that the princess of Isihlangu and High John the Conqueror weren’t off fighting some kind of threat. I didn’t need any distractions from getting Nana back home safe.

“Where’s your raft?” I asked.

Ayanna's magical raft had literally saved my life when I'd first dropped into the Burning Sea. The vessel could shrink to the size of a skateboard so she could sling it over her back, and without it, I don't think we could've saved Alke. Even if she did fly it like a daredevil.

She shrugged. "Wasn't exactly useful on the boat, and it got in the way. So I lent it to Gum Baby."

I choked. "What?!"

Gum Baby, scourge of iron monsters and clean clothes everywhere. The ten-inch loudmouth had been another key person—doll?—in the fight against the Maafa, King Cotton, and the iron monsters that terrorized the land. She was all right, I guess. In small doses.

Very small doses.

"Where's the sticky menace now?" I asked.

"Helping with the rebuilding process. It's amazing—one of her sap attacks has the adhesive power of fifty nails."

I rubbed the back of my head and winced. I'd been on the receiving end of those sap attacks on many occasions. After a few moments I cleared my throat. "Who's with John Henry?" I asked as casually as I could.

She glanced over at Annie, then pulled my elbow and we began to stroll around the keelboat. It took a few moments for her to speak, and I used the time to study the boat. It was huge and flat-bottomed, built of massive planks that had been polished to a gleaming shine. When I reached out to touch the hull, my fingers thrummed as if a small jolt of electricity had shocked me.

"No one at the moment." Ayanna looked left and right, then bit her lip. "He's holed up in Nyame's palace. I'm not really supposed to talk about it, though."

"Because of the Shamble Man?"

She stopped in her tracks and grabbed my shoulder. "What did you say?"

"The Shamble Man." I twisted my head and frowned. "And how he injured John H—mmghg!"

Ayanna clapped a hand over my mouth and dragged me next to the keelboat. For a person who only came up to my shoulder, she moved me with ease. I saw the fury blazing in her eyes and gulped. Reggie had been a marshmallow in comparison.

“How do you know about that? Huh? Nobody was supposed to say anything!”

“Mmghg ffmmmg ghmmm,” I said.

Ayanna removed her hand. “What?”

“I said, the Shamble Man came here. Just a few hours ago. He took…” But I couldn’t finish.

Ayanna loosened her grip on my arm. “Took what?”

I inhaled, then said, “My grandmother. Said he wanted me to know how it felt.”

“You two know each other?”

“NO! I don’t think so….”

I quickly explained the confrontation, and with each passing second Ayanna’s face grew more and more worried. When I finished, she pulled her staff off her back and squeezed the handle, staring into the carved golden face on its end. Finally, she looked up at me.

“This is bad. Really bad. First the attack on John Henry…Nyame and the Flying Ladies are trying to keep it quiet so no one panics. Then the Riverfolk. Now this. It’s like we can’t catch a break. I’ve got to tell Annie.”

“The Riverfolk?” I asked, but Ayanna had already walked away. She marched back around the keelboat and I followed, confused. Annie still stood in the middle of the clearing, the towering trees of the Bottle Tree forest leaning ever so slightly away, as if scared to provoke her temper. The SBP rested in the giant palm of her hand, and Anansi was hiding behind the Contacts app.

“Messin’ with people’s lives like that,” Annie was grumbling as we approached. Her gaze landed on us. “Now, what’s eating you two? River snake nip your behinds?”

“No, but, Miss Annie—” I started to say.

“Just Annie,” she interrupted. She winked. “I don’t

miss.” “Oh, uh…”

Ayanna rolled her eyes. “There’s a problem.” She explained about the Shamble Man’s attacks on John Henry and my grandparents.

Keelboat Annie pursed her lips and frowned. “Sure you right, that *is* a problem. Well, we’ll get to them eventually—”

“Eventually?!” I blurted. “I need to save my grand—Ow!”

Ayanna shut me up by jabbing my foot with her staff. “Don’t interrupt the goddess,” she hissed.

Annie's glare at me hurt even more. "As I was *saying*, first we got to finish the job we were in the middle of before Mr. Six Legs here started making with the magic. We got some more passengers to drop off. Y'all hop aboard and get yourselves settled. Old Man River ain't gonna wait forever, and I sure as shuckin' ain't gonna lay up in this place. No, ma'am. I can feel the spirits clawing at my bones."

We all climbed aboard using a ladder on the side, and Annie stood up straight and rerolled the sleeves of her shirt. Her forearms were like the tree trunks surrounding us in the Bottle Tree forest. "Hold tight, y'all, we're going cruising."

It felt like I'd joined some weird field trip. In fact, when I saw the rows of benches stretching from under the tent to the back of the boat ("The stern," Ayanna corrected), I immediately envisioned a group of kids being shuttled to some riverside school. I'm not sure what I'd expected a keelboat to be. Instead of oars or a sail, you were supposed to use a long wooden stick called a keel pole to push it along.

The giant goddess stomped by as she took a survey of the boat, double-checking everything, then triple-checking, peering over the sides and talking to herself. "Sometimes it's something deep in the water that's stirring things up on the surface." Yep, she definitely seemed worried. Which didn't exactly make me feel any better. I mean, if you were getting on the school bus and the driver started eyeing the steering wheel suspiciously and muttering threats at it, you'd be on edge, too. Then again, I didn't have a good history with school buses.

Meanwhile, Ayanna was coiling rope and making sure all the supplies were tied down tight. When she moved closer, I got her attention.

"Why is she so nervous?" I whispered, nodding at Annie.

Ayanna glanced over, paled, and swallowed. "I'm sure it's nothing," she said, putting a cheerful tone in her voice. "The last few trips have been a bit…rough."

"What do you mean 'rough'?"

"Don't worry! I'm sure she's got the trouble figured out by now."

"Trouble?" I hated the way my voice squeaked, but I also hated surprises. Especially the kind that ended up with me running—or swimming, in this case—for my life. The last time I'd taken a swim in

Alkean waters, giant ships made out of bones had tried to swallow me whole and make me a permanent passenger.

Ayanna didn't elaborate, so I changed the subject.

"And what's up with her and John Henry?" I asked, keeping my voice low. "It doesn't sound like she cares about him much."

Ayanna winced. "Yeah. We haven't really talked about it, but from what I can tell, Annie doesn't think he and some of the other gods did enough to save the Midfolk from the iron monsters."

"What?!" I asked, outraged on his behalf. "He literally pulled them to safety in the Golden Crescent!"

"That was at the end. Before that, the gods of MidPass told everyone to hole up and hide in the Thicket. While Annie and a few other gods sailed up and down the rivers trying to rescue folk, like she's doing now." When Ayanna saw my face, she added, "I'm not saying I agree with her, but—"

Before she could go any further, Keelboat Annie shouted, "Hold on to your dirt-lovin' derrieres!" She lifted something from the rear of the boat and I gasped.

"Sweet peaches!" I said. "That's a whole log!"

Ayanna snickered. The log was Annie's keel pole. The thing looked like someone had uprooted a tree. I couldn't get both of my hands around it, and yet one of Annie's hands easily slipped into the finger grooves at the top. There was a seam in the middle, as if the pole had been split in two, then glued back together.

"This here pole has kept me moving along for as long as I've had this boat," Annie said proudly. "Kept more than a few varmints off my back when the going got tough, too. A whack from this and you'll think twice before sneaking up on Annie." She scowled slightly. "Now it's the only thing that ain't acting all out of sorts! But that's all right. Park your posterior anywhere you please, I gotta get Old Man River up here."

I gripped the edges of my seat as she raised the keel pole high, then jabbed it into the ground and shoved. The bottom of the boat scraped against the floor of the Bottle Tree forest and we lurched into the rolling carpet of mist that had slowly begun to build up again. I winced each time a rock or root scraped at the wood, but before long the sound changed. It sounded almost like…

"Water?" I muttered to myself. I leaned over the side. Sure enough, the pole now splashed instead of *thunk*ed. We were floating!

When Annie saw the amazement on my face, she smiled and patted the railing next to her fondly. “Old Man River and I have an arrangement. Anywhere I need to go, he gives this old barge a lift. All over Alke, as long as there’s a river or stream nearby, Keelboat Annie can get you there.” As Old Man River continued to swell around us, lifting the boat and easing us forward through the forest mist, Annie talked about her life on the river.

“In the days of the iron monsters, boats like this used to carry a bunch of things across MidPass.” She squinted at a chipped section of the keel pole, decided it was still seaworthy (river-worthy?), and dusted off her hands. Annie towered over me and stretched, then pointed at the rows of seats on the boat. “And folks. People, creatures, even a few spirits. For thems that couldn’t sit, they stood the whole journey. You believe that? Stood. Some holding babies, some clutching everything they owned in a sack in their arms, all of them with an idea of a new beginning in their hearts. Leastways, that’s what I like to think.” Annie motioned for me to follow as she moved to the next inspection point on the boat.

The SBP was in my pocket, and I thought about something Anansi had said earlier. “Annie,” I asked, “did people carry stories with them, too? When they moved from one place to another, I mean.”

“Shoot, of course! You bring whatever makes you comfortable. Maybe it’s your auntie’s favorite skillet for biscuits, maybe it’s your daddy’s stories. And you know, stories are easy to carry. Don’t weigh nothing. Don’t cost nothing. Just a little bit of space up here,” she said, tapping the side of her head. “Bit by bit, piece by piece, folks carried a little bit of home with them when they moved. And then you throw someone like you in the mix.”

“Me?”

“Yessir! An Anansesem. You collect them stories, right? It ain’t just about us gods and goddesses and everyone beyond that binary! Naw, you pulling stories of families, of sisters and brothers and cousins, and taking them with you, too.”

“On the phone, you mean?”

“No, inside you.” A giant finger poked my chest, right above my heart. Annie raised both eyebrows. “That there Story Box thingamajig is just a tool to help you—*you*—do your job. Don’t rely on that thing more than you have to. No matter what old Web Butt says. Hear me?” I nodded, just as Ayanna called out that the river was ready. Before I could ask what that meant, Annie moved to the rear of the keelboat, leaving

me to think on what she'd just said. It sort of reminded me of what Anansi had been talking about earlier, that idea of a Diaspora. Carrying stories on journeys, planting their seeds in new grounds, connecting us all. I needed to think about that some more, especially since as an Anansesem I was supposed to be doing a lot of that carrying and planting.

Responsibilities, man. They never let up.

*Thump thump*

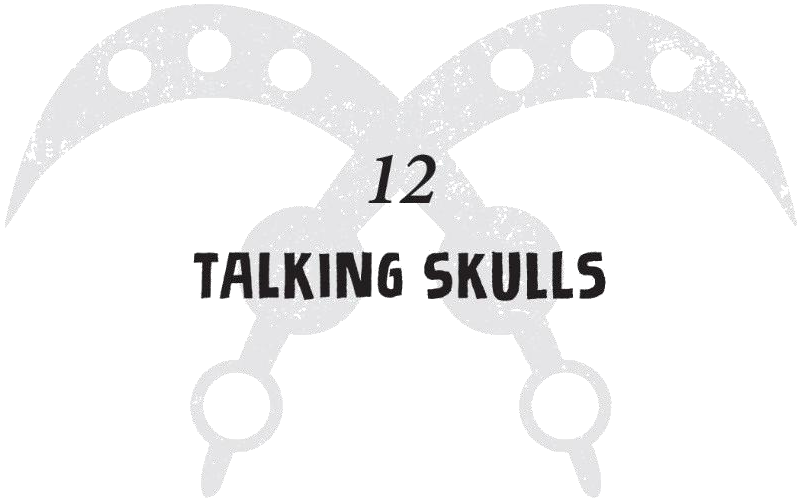
Something rattled against the hull near me. I looked around. No one was close by—everyone else was occupied. Annie pushed us forward, which confused me. Where were the passengers we were supposed to drop off? Ayanna stood at the prow checking for obstacles, calling out directions so Annie could steer us around them. I didn't know how either of them could see, though. The mists had completely engulfed us now, surrounding the boat in milky-white strands of clouds that dissolved as we passed through them and re-formed behind us.

*Thump thump*

There was that sound again…. It came from right over the guardrail.

I got up to take a look. The noises grew more frequent. It wasn't just thumps now, but all sorts of scrapes and knocks and scratching noises, as if…as if there was something climbing up—

I peered over the rail, straight into the hollow eyes of a grinning skull.



# 12
# TALKING SKULLS

**THE SKULL AND I STARED AT EACH OTHER. MORE THUMPING AND** rattling echoed across the boat, and I fought down a wave of panic as dozens—maybe hundreds!—of skulls inched up the hull. Some large, some small, all bleached white. And when they saw me, they began to shake and rattle, as if in warning. My body locked into place. They were like tiny, ghastly crabs swarming toward us. Just when I opened my mouth to either shout in horror or…Well, no, that was it, I was only going to shout in horror. Just then, the first skull beat me to it.

"Save me," it whispered.

The scream died on my lips. "Uh…" I said. We stared at each other.

"Save me," another skull said. Then another. And another. Soon all the skulls were talking, their collective whispering like a faint breeze moving through dead leaves.

"Save me. Save me. Save me."

It almost sounded like the spirits back on Nana and Granddad's farm. Their pleas grew louder as they inched closer and closer, and my body was still frozen in shock. In my mind, I saw other creatures made of bones. Larger and scarier, surging toward me. The bone ships, the haunted vessels that had roamed the Burning Sea. I fell backward while shouting a wordless warning.

"Tristan!"

Ayanna caught me before I hit the deck, and I pointed at the hull in terror. "They're back!"

"Who?" she asked.

Keelboat Annie moved past us quickly in a giant stride that rocked the boat from side to side, wielding the keel pole like a baseball bat. She peered over the side, then let out a hearty chuckle. Ayanna joined her, and—to my extreme surprise—squealed in delight.

Squealed.

I've never heard Ayanna make that sound. You would've thought she'd found some kittens, not legions of creatures that belonged in a horror movie. But she was laughing like she'd reunited with some old friends. Then, get this, she had the nerve to turn around and gesture for me to come over as if nothing was wrong.

Nope. No way. At least, I wasn't planning on it until Anansi called to me from the SBP. It had fallen out of my pocket and skidded across the deck.

"Hey, hero of MidPass, is your wrist burning?"

"What?" I asked. When I picked up the phone (no scratches, Nyame screen protectors FTW), Anansi was swinging gently in a spiderweb hammock, a straw hat tilted over his eyes. He raised an arm and tapped its wrist with the other hand.

I looked down at my wrist, confused, then felt the air *whoosh* out of my lungs as I realized what he was referring to. "Oh," I said, feeling a little foolish. The Anansi adinkra on my bracelet wasn't glowing or hot. We weren't under attack.

"Are you coming?" Ayanna called. "Don't be rude. I mean *ruder*." I trudged over cautiously. There weren't any bone ships coming our way. Those had only been in my head. Ghosts of the past.

Once, when I was in one of my therapy sessions with Mr. Richardson, we'd talked about how our fears and memories could haunt us, even into the future. We were eating popcorn mixed with M&Ms and drinking hot cocoa when Mr. Richardson said, "Ghosts from the past are like scars. They heal, and some even fade over time, but they never truly go away. They're reminders of trauma."

There was that word again: *trauma.*

"Tristan, come on!"

When I peeked over the edge, I still saw skulls, but now their bottoms were just stuck to the side of the boat like limpets. (I looked up limpets one time. Have you ever seen one? They're like a snail that has a seashell for a hat. Amazing.)

Keelboat Annie shook her head and headed back to her position in the stern.

"Did they talk to you?" I asked Ayanna.

She raised an eyebrow and cupped a hand around her ear, pretending to listen. After a moment she shook her head. "Nope. Nothing."

I glared at her, then looked at the first skull I'd seen, the largest one. It clung to the wooden hull, silent. I tapped it gingerly with one finger, recoiling immediately in anticipation. Nothing happened. I frowned, then poked it harder. "Come on, say something. Whisper for help like you did before!"

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a muffled snicker came from behind me. When I turned around, Ayanna was trying to keep a straight face, but she burst into laughter as soon as we made eye contact. From the back of the boat came a giant "HA-HAAAAAA" as Keelboat Annie shook the vessel with her own guffaws. Even Anansi was laughing. I could feel the SBP vibrate in my pocket in time with his chuckles.

Finally, Ayanna flapped her hands and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry," she gasped. "I'm so sorry. But it was too funny. See, it's happened to all of us."

"What?" I asked.

"The Talking Skulls. They do it to every new person they meet." She finally stopped laughing and stared quizzically at my confused expression. "You've really never heard of them? I would've thought that you of all people…"

I bit my lip and shook my head.

Once Ayanna mentioned it, I did recall Nana telling me a folktale about a man who found a Talking Skull on the riverbank. But when he brought others to listen to it, the skull remained silent, and everyone made fun of the man. At least that's what I could remember. I didn't want to admit that ever since Nana had been taken, I was having trouble feeling stories.

Ayanna shrugged and extended her arm over the side. The skull closest to her rattled up the hull, and she grabbed it. She walked it over to the rows of benches in the middle of the boat and set it down before repeating the process with another skull. After a second I started helping her.

We worked in silence. There had to be thirty to forty skulls hanging on as Keelboat Annie steered us through the mist. Every so often I thought I saw low shapes cruising alongside us, just out of sight. Other boats, but not

bone ships, luckily. Faint snatches of song echoed across the water. Chants, maybe. A group of voices keeping time as Annie poled.

*"Hup-one, hup-two, carry me on the way.*

*Hup-one, hup-two, lookin' for a better*

*day."* "Do you hear *that*?" I whispered.

Ayanna nodded. "You hear it when Annie gets in a groove. She says—"

"She *says*," Keelboat Annie boomed behind us, "to stop with the jibber-jabber and get our passengers aboard! No cause to make these fine folk wait."

Ayanna scooped up five more skulls and sat them on the bench, and I grabbed the last straggler, the one that had first spoken to me, and gingerly carried it to the final seat.

Keelboat Annie nodded and said, "Now. Sounds like someone missed a tale or two about our passengers. Is that right?"

I nodded, avoiding Ayanna's stare.

Keelboat Annie lashed her pole to a rail to keep it in place and then joined us. "Well, no one knows how a Talking Skull gets where it does—it's just there when you least expect it. And if you get the fool notion to start talking in front of them…well, they're gonna chat right back. But see, that conversation is just for you. It ain't for you to go spreading. Try to involve someone else in what y'all supposed to keep betwixt yourselves, and them Talking Skulls will go silent as a stone."

*Save me*, the skulls had said. Save them from what? I wondered. The Shamble Man? Were they trying to flee him like the spirits back in the barn had? Or were they somehow channeling Nana…? I clenched my fists in frustration. I needed to get this ride back on course for…where? I didn't know, exactly.

The boat shuddered, and Keelboat Annie frowned. "Now, what's got Old Man River riled up?" We waited, but nothing happened, and she scratched her head. "That didn't feel right. Well, anyway, that's the story of them Talking Skulls. Whatever you heard them say was meant for you. It's up to you whether you wanna listen."

Meanwhile, Ayanna had been studying me the whole time. "Tristan knows all the stories. He can bring them to life when he tells them! Go on, show Annie—"

"It's fine," I interrupted. "I…just want to hear Keelboat Annie's stories. How did you start giving the skulls rides?"

I tried to ignore Ayanna's questioning looks. No need to tell her the Shamble Man had thrown my Anansesem abilities off-kilter. *May your heart wither. May your tears fall endlessly, as mine once did.*

Keelboat Annie cleared her throat several times, and a faraway look settled on her face. "Now, I told you I carried all sorts of folk up and down the river. Well, it just so happened that on one of them return trips, this old boat ran aground near a lake in the Grasslands."

"The Grasslands?" I interrupted. Wasn't that where Ninah was from?

Keelboat Annie nodded. "Behind Isihlangu. Whole countryside filled with lakes and cities just as pretty as can be. Like jewels, they are. Leastways, they were once. But after I'd dropped off some folks, Old Man River took me 'round that way. He always carries me to the next pickup, but I'll be a fish out of water if he didn't leave me high and dry in an old lake, just as muddy as you please. It's like something had sucked all the water out of the Grasslands. Anyways, them Talking Skulls were scattered about in the reeds, waiting for someone to stumble on 'em and get in all sorts of trouble. Not Annie, though! Shoot, no. I, unlike some folks around here, know the score. Figured they were the passengers Old Man River wanted me to collect, so I did. And that's what I was doing when you and ole Web Butt pulled me from my job."

Anansi snorted from his spot in the hammock in the corner of the SBP, but I noticed he did it quietly. Probably didn't want another chewing-out.

"So now where are you headed?" I asked.

"Back to the Golden Crescent, I figure." Keelboat Annie returned to her post, where she loosened the pole and grinned. "Got a full load of passengers and one hero. Might as well bring 'em on home, right? Maybe you'll find what you're looking for there."

The SBP vibrated, and when I looked down Anansi gave me a thumbs-up, like we were on the right track.

*Home.*

Before I could truly process that word, the boat surged forward. It sliced across the surface of Old Man River like a surfer. Ayanna threw back her head and laughed, and even I grinned. Drops of water splashed on our faces and arms, and dozens of rainbows appeared like ribbons in midair. I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of the boat, but between Keelboat Annie's sure hands and Ayanna cackling next to me, it felt like—for once— things were finally looking up….

Yeah. You already know.

They weren’t.

# 13
# HERO'S WELCOME

**SEVERAL THINGS WENT WRONG FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.**

First, Old Man River carried us angrily out of the mist, twisting and turning through a small field of razor-sharp grass before we splashed into the sea. Keelboat Annie steered us as carefully as she could, but her frown grew more troubled each time the craft shuddered or rocked unexpectedly. I could tell she was confused as to why her traveling partner was acting out of sorts. It was like the Old Man had woken up on the wrong side of the riverbed.

(Ha-haaaaa! I'm here all week.)

Still, we made it to the coast of the Golden Crescent unharmed. Wet, but unharmed. And for a brief period, it was magical. The shining blue waters of the bay rippled as far as the eye could see. Gleaming sand dunes rose to meet the ivory walls of the marina. We were on the north side of the bay, and the coast curved away from us like a backward C. Several large yachts with ruby-red adinkra symbols on their sails bobbed up and down in their berths. Behind them, up the gently sloping hills, palaces rose out of emerald-green forests, their golden-capped towers winking in the midday sun. It was the palaces that had given the area its name, and their beautiful splendor should have filled me with joy.

"Feels weird, doesn't it?" Ayanna asked quietly.

Waves lapped at the boat's hull as I stared at the spot where the Maafa had beached and unleashed a horde of iron monsters onto Alkean soil. It felt

like only yesterday we'd all come together to battle the minions of the evil slave ship. Yet there were no lingering signs of the battle, save for the long floating wooden walkway anchored to the beach by thick pillars that stretched off toward the horizon and disappeared into the distance. John Henry had been building it the last time I'd seen him in person. He'd said it was a way to bridge the divide between MidPass and the Alkean continent.

John Henry, holed up in Nyame's palace. Was he okay? I needed to find out.

"How long has it been?" I asked, peering around to see if anyone was hiding nearby.

Ayanna knew immediately what I was talking about. "Last time we saw you was a few months ago." Time moved at different speeds in the two realms. I'd only been back in Alabama for a few weeks.

"We've been working every day," Ayanna continued as Keelboat Annie hopped into the shallows and wrapped ropes around her wrists. With what looked like very little effort, the giant goddess began to haul the boat onto the beach. "Everyone. Cleaning, rebuilding, expanding. Some folks from the Horn came up, as well as people from the Sands. They'd escaped the notice of…the iron monsters, but now they're all coming to our aid."

"Sounds like everyone is pitching in."

"They are. Well, except for the Grasslands. Haven't heard from them yet, but I'm sure they'll be coming soon, especially after we sent our special messenger. So, we're making it. It's been a little difficult at times, but everyone has welcomed the Midfolk without a single complaint."

"Even High John?" I asked.

High John the Conqueror, the smiling god from MidPass with a giant shadow crow for a companion, hadn't been too keen on working with the Alkeans, and he'd taken John Henry to task about it on several occasions.

Ayanna flashed a quick smile. "Yes, even him. Eventually."

I scanned the beach. Something was bothering me. I tried not to let it show, but nobody's perfect. "So…where is everyone?"

From the look of pity Ayanna wore, I hadn't quite managed to keep the disappointment out of my voice. But the beach was empty. No shouting crowds, no joyful celebration. There wasn't even a banner! I mean, it wasn't like I was expecting much, you get me? But…I *had* helped save Alke. Okay, I also endangered it by uppercutting a magical tree, but we need to stop living in the past.

“I guess they’re all busy,” Ayanna said. “You know, rebuilding a country?”

After another second of glancing around hopefully, I sighed. Ayanna shook her head and turned away, probably to roll her eyes. The boat ground to a halt, and Keelboat Annie rapped on the hull. We hopped down, and the three of us—four, if you included Anansi—stared at the empty beach. The bay, which had been filled with ships of all sizes the last time I’d visited, now only had a few anchored in place.

Anansi yawned and climbed into his webbed hammock on the phone’s screen. “Well, this has been a wonderful cruise. Do me a favor, will you, boy? Leave me on the boat. I’m not exactly eager to see old Shiny Eyes again. He might find a new ‘task’ for me to perform, and this cramped metal rectangle is just starting to grow on me.”

“I don’t think—” I began, but it was too late. The spider god was already fast asleep, snoring lightly as he rocked in the SBP’s screen. I glared at him, mumbling something that would’ve gotten me in trouble in school. But he did have a point. Nyame and Anansi weren’t exactly best friends. Quite the opposite. And I couldn’t risk losing Anansi to the sky god. I needed the trickster to help me unravel the mystery of the Shamble Man and rescue Nana before it was too late. It worried me that he would be on the boat by himself, but Keelboat Annie solved that issue by presenting the third and final problem.

No matter how much I tried to convince her, she refused to accompany us to Nyame’s palace.

“No sirree, I won’t step one foot up there,” she said, her large arms folded across her chest and a dark frown on her face. “They waited until the last minute to confront those iron monsters, and if they didn’t want my help before, they don’t need me now. Let them hem and haw all they want. Me and Old Man River will be just fine down here,” she continued, jerking a thumb at the rattling skulls on the deck behind her. “Besides, I’ve got to get these boneheads over to their new riverside home down the bay a bit. Get it? Boneheads.”

I groaned. It should be illegal for grown-ups to make puns. “Fine. Can you at least keep an eye on this for me?” I held up the SBP.

She raised an eyebrow but nodded, and I reluctantly passed over the phone. I didn’t tell her the passcode, though. No sense inviting trouble from either of the gods.

While Annie climbed back onto the boat and stowed the phone away, Ayanna squinted and put a hand up to shade her eyes.

"Hey, look," she said. She pointed up the beach, where a tall, skinny boy with golden-brown skin sprinted toward us, kicking up sand as he ran. "Looks like your welcome party is finally here."

"Ha-ha," I muttered sarcastically. I did, however, straighten my hoodie and dust the sand off my Chucks. Gotta make a good impression, no matter who's coming to thank you.

The boy skidded to a stop in front of us, spraying sand everywhere and sending us reeling backward.

"Hey," I said, shielding my face.

The boy, who was a little older than me, wore a black-and-gold woven tunic and matching black pants. His hair was plaited and decorated with what looked like silver wires, the braids pulled back into a ponytail, and his feet were in sandals. A small silver-and-gold satchel was slung across his body, and he rested one hand on it as if its contents were precious. He wasn't breathing hard, even though he'd just dashed a hundred yards, easy. A smile spread slowly across his face as he looked me up and down, raised an eyebrow, then dismissed me completely and turned to Ayanna.

"Hey, sis," he said, winking.

Sis? Was this Ayanna's brother?

She rolled her eyes, which didn't answer my question. "Junior. What do you want?"

He threw his arms wide and put on an innocent face. "Come on, now, don't be like that. I'm here to welcome you back! Everyone's been waiting for you to return. Well. You and your…companion." This last word he directed at me without so much as a glance.

"Hey!" I said.

Junior jerked a thumb at me. "Is that all he can say?"

I stepped forward so he had no choice but to look at me. "I can say a whole lot if it's worth my time. Ayanna, who is this clown?"

"Don't mind him," she said. "This is just Junior, one of the people I told you about. You know, the ones who are *supposed* to be helping Nyame rebuild the Golden Crescent. Instead, he just cracks jokes and gets in everybody's way. Sort of like somebody else I know around here."

Junior and I ignored her shots at us and studied each other. So this was one of the Alkeans who had escaped the wrath of the iron monsters. He

seemed…annoying. But at least he was here now, so he couldn't be all bad, right?

I pushed my irritation down—way down—and held out my hand, forcing a smile onto my face. "Nice to meet you, Junior. My name is—"

"Yeah, yeah." The boy flapped a hand as he interrupted me. "We get it. Everyone knows who you are. The *hero.* What, did you think there'd be a parade when you arrived?" Junior shook his head. "Anyone could've done what you did if the gods were blessing them left and right."

My jaw dropped. The fact that I'd been hoping for some sort of fanfare only made his words sting more. Also, they were eerily similar to the Shamble Man's, and that made me angry. "That's not fair," I spluttered. "You don't even know me."

"Yeah, well, life isn't fair."

I glared at him as he smirked. "All right, then, where were you when people needed help? Hiding?"

"Oh-ho." He clapped a hand over his heart and pretended to stagger back. "I'm wounded."

"Not yet. Keep talking and we'll see."

"Quick with the words, huh? Is that all you're quick with? I wonder." I folded my arms across my chest. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"We've been told all about the mighty Tristan Strong, Savior of Alke. Hero. Leader against the horrific and the terrifying, a defender of justice. But I've heard a lot of stories in my life, tall tales and outright fiction. So I think we should make sure you are who you claim to be." "How?"

"A race. To the top of the hill. First one to the sky god's palace wins."

"How would that prove anything?" Ayanna asked, taking the words out of my mouth.

He didn't answer her, and I stared at him in disbelief. He couldn't be serious. I shook my head and started to turn around. This was ridiculous. I didn't have time for childish games. I turned to Ayanna. "Come on, let's go find John Henry and the others. We've got to warn them about the—"

Junior cleared his throat loudly. "John Henry isn't seeing anyone." I turned around. "What?"

"You heard me. Word is he's not seeing anyone except other gods. And, last I checked, you weren't a god."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Miss Sarah or Miss Rose, then."

“Busy.”

“High John?”

“Gone.”

“He’s on his recruiting mission with Thandiwe, remember?” Ayanna said.

I threw up my hands. “Fine, we’ll just go see Nyame and—” “Wow, you just don’t get it, do you?” Junior squatted and began to stretch his legs, pulling the toes of one foot toward him, then repeating the same thing with his other foot. “No one’s gonna meet with you. You’re not important enough. We have a country to rebuild. Nyame has even placed his guardians at the entrances to his palace to keep out unwanteds while he and the other gods meet. And it seems to me you fall into the category of *unwanted.*”

That got my attention. I’d seen Nyame’s warrior statues in action. No way did I want to cross any of them. But I had to talk to the gods. I had to check on John Henry and see if he and the others would help me go after the Shamble Man. My grandmother needed us! I looked at Ayanna, but she bit her lower lip and shrugged. If we’d had her raft, we might’ve been able to sneak into the palace from the roof, but even that would’ve been risky.

We were stuck.

Junior stretched his arms out wide and began twirling them in small circles to warm up his muscles. He flashed a bright smile at me. “If you beat me in the race, I’ll show you a foolproof way of getting into Nyame’s palace.”

I stared at him. “You’re lying.”

He held up both hands. “I swear I’m not.”

I looked around the empty beach, then sighed. “Fine. Let’s just—”

“But if I win,” he said with a sly look, “I get five minutes alone with the Story Box.”

My hand automatically went to the pocket that normally held the SBP; then I remembered I’d given it to Keelboat Annie. And before I replied, Junior dropped the act and stood up straight. “I’m not playing games, Anansesem. No trickery, no theft. I just…” He paused, then cleared his throat. “The Story Box is legendary. All the stories, held forever and carried across worlds and realms? It is…a treasure. All I want to do is tell it a story about my father, and how much he defined me and helped motivate me.

He…left, a long time ago. This story about him is all I have left, and I would be forever grateful if I could tell it."

A raw note of honesty had crept into his voice. I looked away, swallowed, and thought about another boy who'd wanted to record the stories of others. "No tricks?" I asked.

"None."

I hesitated, then nodded. "Okay, but you don't need to race me to do that. Why don't you just—"

Junior backed up and shook his head. "I don't take anything I haven't earned," he said, his words almost a snarl. "I will win, or you will."

I nodded. I could respect that. And either way, the only thing I'd lose was time. I wasn't going to get into Nyame's palace without Junior's help.

"Let's do it," I said. "Ayanna, you want to race, too?"

"Not a chance," she said. "You two go look silly if you want—I need to stay with Annie."

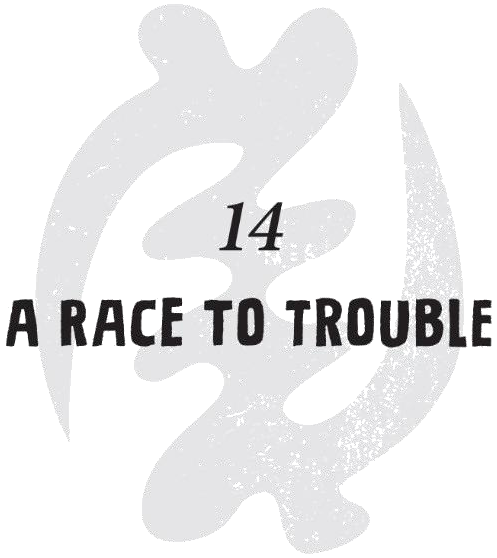
"Right. Work-study."

"Work*ing*, unlike y'all."

"You coming or not?" Junior asked me. With fierce determination on his face, he adjusted the satchel so it was on his back. The two of us lined up next to each other and jostled shoulders as we prepared to race.

"At least give us a countdown," I said to Ayanna.

"Boys," she said, shaking her head. "On your mark, get set, go!"



# 14
# A RACE TO TROUBLE

**HAVE YOU EVER SPRINTED IN THE SAND? IT'S BRUTAL. ABSOLUTELY** horrendous.

So of course Granddad had made me do it a few times when he held his annual Walter Strong Winter Boxing Camp. A fancy title that meant he got to drag me and some other unlucky amateur boxers to do sand sprints. Now, most trainers would head south for the winter, but not Granddad. If there was a way to make training more uncomfortable, Walter Strong would find it. Such as running as hard as you could next to a partially frozen lake. Yes, I'm talking about Lake Michigan in Chicago. In the winter.

Like I said. Horrendous.

Now I tried to keep up with the gangly-limbed boy as he tore up the dunes and slid down to the polished marble plaza beyond them. Arms pumping, half stumbling, we charged across the wide-open space toward one of the spiraling main avenues that led to the highest hill and grandest palace in all the Golden Crescent. But just before we reached the street, Junior took a sharp right turn down a narrow brick walkway steeped in shadows.

"Wait, where are you going?" I called.

Junior glanced back at me, winked, then dipped his head and put on a burst of speed. I gaped stupidly for a moment before increasing my own pace. We sped through the dark corridor, barely dodging sharp corners as the alley twisted and turned. I gritted my teeth as I tried to keep up. This

race wasn't fair! I didn't know this route. There was no way I was letting that boy out of my sight.

Suddenly Junior dipped around another corner, and we exploded into a dazzling plaza. I recognized that place! I'd been there before. It was filled with fountains as well as bushes trimmed into the shapes of giant animals— we were near the hidden gate to Nyame's palace. We'd just avoided the main avenues—which meant we'd avoided his golden sentinels. Now all I had to do was—

*BOOM!*

A giant golden foot, complete with a fancy golden sandal, crashed to the ground inches away from me. A towering statue of a woman holding a golden stool in one hand and a spear in the other glared down at us. Junior sprinted around it with a wild glint in his eyes. He made a face at me over his shoulder and ran toward two towering marble pillars. The air shimmered between the columns.

Nyame's gate.

Junior was getting away!

"Hi, Kumi!" I shouted up at the statue. "Bye, Kumi!" The golden woman tilted her head as I waved, running backward. I raised my wrist and jiggled the adinkra bracelet, hoping she would notice the sky god's charm and not kick me all the way to MidPass. I'd seen her punt before, and let me tell you, NFL teams would be begging her to play for them if they knew.

To my profound relief, Kumi didn't follow me. She nodded, then turned and resumed guarding the plaza. A thought wriggled to the front of my mind—what exactly was she watching for? My thoughts were interrupted when Junior let out a shout of joy as he ran through Nyame's gate. I growled and barreled forward.

Once he was past the gate, Junior slowed a bit to marvel at the palace orchards on either side of the path, whistling as he jogged. A sly grin spread across my face. He didn't know I was right on his heels. He looked back, startled when he saw me, and the whistle died on his lips as he began to run again.

The paved road flew under our feet. Inch by inch, breath by ragged breath, I began to pull even with him. We were shoulder to shoulder. Then slowly, by the slimmest of margins, I pulled ahead! Junior was sweating now, and the plaits had come loose from his ponytail and were fluttering behind him as we flew up one rolling hill and down another. My sides

began to cramp, but I didn't dare slow down to massage them out. Nyame's palace was just ahead, and I was going to *win.*

Two black shadows rippled across the path. I didn't have time to look up, though I noticed they seemed pretty large. The only thing I was focused on was the huge entrance at the base of Nyame's palace with a curtain of water falling down in front of it. Almost…there…

I slapped the stone wall next to the waterfall just before Junior did, and I threw up both my hands and stood victorious. "Ha!" I said, grinning as Junior sulked. "Take that! Now show me your secret way inside so I can talk to John Henry."

Junior wiped the sweat from his forehead and calmly tied his plaits back. Then he shrugged. "All right, all right. You beat me. Thought I had you there back at the gate. That old lady never lets me through, but she was distracted by you this time."

"Yeah, yeah. Quit stalling and get me inside."

Junior rolled his neck, then flashed a wide, dimpled smile. "Haven't you figured it out yet? I already did." He pointed up to the sky. "Personal escorts."

The huge black shadows from the orchards slid across the ground toward us, and I finally looked up to see who they belonged to. What I saw sent all the air in my lungs rushing out in a giant *whoosh*.

Huge black wings spread wide.

Ivory white robes trimmed in black-and-gold braid.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose, goddesses of MidPass, dropped to the ground, stern expressions on their faces.

"Tristan Strong—" Miss Sarah said, staring at me over the top of her glasses.

"—you are in big trouble," her sister finished.

Junior knew this was gonna happen. He was almost as tricky as Anansi.

The two winged goddesses marched us down marble-and-gold hallways in complete silence. Well…Junior and I were silent. Our guardians kept up a steady stream of commentary. You know the kind—the thing adults do when they're talking to you and asking you questions, but *you don't dare answer them*. It's a trap! They're just trying to get you to say something so they can lecture you even more. I call them mom-ologues.

"Honestly, you two—" Miss Sarah said.

“—should know better,” Miss Rose finished.

“Everyone’s very busy, and—”

“—you shouldn’t be disturbing them.”

“In fact—”

“—you should be helping—”

“—instead of playing silly games with this one—” Miss Sarah added. “—who knows better—”

“—and should be keeping a low profile.”

Junior frowned but didn’t look up. He’d been quiet since we entered the palace, and I could tell he’d gotten in trouble with the Flying Ladies before. The expression on his face reminded me of mine the time my mother caught me trying to do a handstand and eat a stack of Oreos at the same time. Yes, I knew better, but think of how cool it would’ve been if I’d succeeded! Also, yes, I’d fallen and crunched a million Oreo crumbs into the carpet, but you can’t make an omelet without cracking a few eggs.

“And another thing…” Miss Sarah continued, and I groaned under my breath.

Back and forth they went, their large raven-black wings draped over them like cloaks. Miss Sarah, tall and slim with a fade that would’ve made any barber back home proud, wore copper-braid glasses perched on the tip of her nose, while Miss Rose was short and wore a black-and-gold headwrap high atop her head. Both moved quickly, and both looked extremely tired.

We walked through an arched passage and entered an open-ceilinged room filled with soft rosy light. The carpet was grass, strewn with feathery white petals that smelled like vanilla and mint, and a gentle breeze blew through the space. It would’ve been very peaceful and inviting if not for the huge pile of stone, lumber, and tools stacked in the middle. The next room we entered was similar. As was the next. Every one of them was filled with the supplies needed to rebuild the damaged parts of the Golden Crescent. A big reminder that the work wasn’t done yet. But as much as I wanted to help rebuild the second-greatest city I’d ever seen (Chicago over everything, baby), I had another urgent task.

“Um, Miss Sarah, Miss Rose?” I said. “Where are you taking us? I actually came here because I need your help. All of you. Well, I know John Henry is injured, but…” My voice trailed off as the two goddesses came to an abrupt halt and spun around. All the sunlight in the open-air hallway

seemed to drain away as the two women loomed over us, their wings stretching around us to prevent our escape.

"What do you know of this?" Miss Rose hissed. Her eyes darted right and left. "Who told you?"

Miss Sarah's wings flapped once, a single powerful move that lifted her several feet into the air so she could scan the area for eavesdroppers. After a few seconds she landed, nodded at Miss Rose—who sent a bewildered Junior to the far end of the corridor to wait, protesting loudly the whole time—then folded her arms across her chest. "Speak," she said.

I didn't have a choice. So, keeping my voice low, I told the goddesses about the events Anansi and I had seen unfold through the SBP. My voice faltered a bit when I came to the part where the Shamble Man attacked John Henry. It was still a shock to me—the man I'd thought was unbeatable, the strongest person ever, had been bested! When I finished, I fell silent and stared hopefully.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose looked at each other uneasily.

"So it *was*—" Miss Rose muttered.

"—who we suspected," Miss Sarah finished.

"Who?" I asked, unable to control myself. "I have to find him. If you know who it is…"

"If you knew who it is, and what he is capable of, you would not be here, Tristan. You have to leave this to us."

"Are you going to go find him, whoever the Shamble Man is?" They shook their heads at the same time. "The Golden Crescent still hasn't recovered from fighting the iron monsters," Miss Rose said. "With Brer Rabbit still not one hundred percent, and John Henry…well, it's just us and Nyame until High John gets back, and it will take more than that to stop…to stop the Shamble Man."

Before I could protest again and tell them about Nana, a young Alkean girl in pigtails ran up behind us to speak to the goddesses. The girl was out of breath, and the Flying Ladies had to bend over to make out her whispers.

Miss Rose listened for a moment, then scowled.

"Again?" The little girl nodded.

Miss Sarah sighed. "We'll deal with it. Run along and find your parents."

The girl skipped away, and the flying goddesses turned as one to face me.

“We’ll have to continue this conversation later,” said Miss Rose. “For now, you two come with us.” We walked over to Junior, who was standing at the end of the hall with a confused look on his face. The goddesses led us into a sitting area surrounding a tiny fountain. In the center of the fountain was a statue of a tiny dancing child. A spout of water shot out of its mouth and landed in the circular marble pool. The oval room’s walls were glossy white and once again there was no ceiling, so the gray light of the overcast sky filled the room. The goddesses stared at the clouds uneasily, murmured to each other, then turned to us.

“You will wait here—” Miss Sarah said.

“—until Nyame returns,” Miss Rose said.

“And don’t speak another word about John Henry.”

“But—” I tried again, and once more they ignored me.

Just then, a booming voice rang from outside. “KUMI, WHERE ARE ROSE AND SARAH?”

“Oh no,” I said under my breath. The sky god did not sound like he was in a great mood. Perfect. Just what I needed. At this rate I was collecting lectures like me and Eddie used to collect Pokémon. Nyame was probably an air type. A hot-air type. The first time I met him, I’d just freed him from the clutches of giant iron monsters who’d been slowly poisoning him to drain him of his powers. Suspicious of all outsiders, he’d instructed Kumi, the warrior statue outside, to escort me and my gang of adventurers to his throne, where he interrogated us mercilessly.

It looked like it was déjà vu.

“Wonderful,” I muttered. “We’re in a perfect place to get yelled at.”

Miss Rose sighed, then pointed a finger at me and Junior. “You two… behave. Understood?”

We both nodded, and the winged goddess pursed her lips in suspicion. Then she and Miss Sarah flapped their wings and soared into the gray sky above. Within seconds it was just me and Junior in the sky god’s sitting room. I stared around with glum resignation. Forget my adinkra bracelet and my now-unresponsive talents as an Anansesem. My superpower was getting lectured. Any moment now Nyame would step out and—

*Plunk*

Something flew through the air and beaned me in the back of the head. “Hey!” I said, turning and glaring at Junior as I rubbed the sore spot. “What is your problem?”

He squinted at me. “What?”

“Don’t act innocent. Quit messing around before we get in even more trouble.”

He shook his head and turned and walked away. I stared daggers at his back, then moved in the opposite direction. But I hadn’t gone more than a few steps when Junior yelped.

“Ouch!”

When I turned around, he was rubbing his arm and scowling. “Is that how it is?” He picked up a rock and threw it at me. I managed to duck just in time and it whistled past my ear, barely missing.

“Are you serious?” I shouted. This kid was working my last nerve! (I don’t know where that expression comes from, but Dad uses it all the time when I’m bugging him. Can you lose your nerves? Do they disappear as you get older? Where’s the last one? Grown-ups are weird, I tell you.)

“You threw one first!” Junior shouted.

“No, I didn’t. What’s with you? Ever since I got here you’ve been acting like a spoiled brat!”

“I’m not the one with the hero complex,” the boy said through gritted teeth. “I’m sick of hearing about you. ‘Tristan did this. Tristan saved that. Tristan, Tristan, Tristan.’ But when it’s time for the real work, to rebuild what we lost, suddenly the great hero is nowhere to be found.”

My jaw dropped. Was he for real? “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“You—” He stopped suddenly, looking around. “Wait. Something’s wrong.”

I took a step forward, shaking my head as my temper flared. “Oh no you don’t. Ever since I came here you’ve been messing with me. Talking slick like nothing was gonna happen. Well, now it’s time to put up or shut up.”

“No, I’m serious.” He looked around nervously.

“Yeah, me, too.” I stalked toward him, fully ready to start a fight. I knew good and well it would get me into even more trouble, but at that moment I didn’t care. The Shamble Man had Nana, everyone in Alke was keeping secrets, and this new boy—Mr. Popular—was accusing me of being a fake. I couldn’t take any more. I was a foot away from him when he froze, then looked past me.

“Hey,” he said very carefully, “wasn’t there a fountain in here?”

I stopped, confused. But when I looked around, he was right. The statue of the child was missing, and the room had gone silent. Only the pool remained. All my senses screamed danger, but before I could turn and run, or put up my fists, or even let out a high-pitched scream, a dark shape rose from the top of the wall overhead and hurled itself at me like a missile.

# 15
# WHEN THE GODS FADE

**THE DARK SHAPE COLLIDED INTO ME LIKE A RIGHT HOOK. I WENT** sprawling to the ground, knocking Junior over in the process. He shouted in surprise; I was hollering up a storm as I tried to defend against the sneak attack, and the small assailant was singing at the top of their lungs.

The attacker peeled off of me—taking some of my arm hairs with them —and skipped, yes, skipped, around the room. I squinted from where I sat on the floor. They were the right size. And yet…

A short, deep-brown creature with a giant head stood a few feet away. Big hollow eyes stared at me, and its oversize hands dangled almost all the way to the floor.

"Oh, you don't know nobody now."

Its high-pitched voice made me wince. Junior—our argument forgotten —leaned toward me with a carefully neutral expression and whispered, "You know this…thing?"

I shook my head.

Wrong move.

The creature put its hands on its hips, or tried to, before giving up and stomping to where we sat. "Don't you know it's rude to whisper! After everything we've been through, you don't know nobody. You too famous. Got too big for your switches."

I started to scoot backward, unsure of what was happening. "I…You mean *britches*? Gum Baby, is that you?"

“There you go again. Always trying to correct somebody. Of course it’s Gum Baby! Who else it gonna be? Bum Gaby? Gum Baby swears you’re the stupidest smart person she knows.”

As the creature stomped forward, something amazing happened. A seam appeared at the top of its giant head, and like a zipper, it began to travel down and peel apart. Wisps of steam escaped as the two halves separated, and out popped a tiny brown doll wearing what looked to be a black-and-gold onesie and box braids.

Gum Baby stood in front of me with her hands on her hips and glared. “After Gum Baby saved your behind, you gonna act brand-new. And here she was, ready to invite you to join her next secret mission.”

I stood up, and Junior did as well. “What mission?” I asked. “And… wait, what’s with the disguise?”

Gum Baby stopped glaring and smiled proudly. “It’s a sap suit! Gum Baby designed it herself. Well, sort of. Gum Baby got the idea from Anansi. See, he pretended to be Brer Rabbit, but it was really a disguise. So Gum Baby figured she’d create her own disguise. Nobody will ever know it’s her!”

I looked at the suit, which was slowly collapsing under its own weight, then at the fountain. “And…you pretended to be a fountain? How did you get the water to flow out of the sap suit?”

Gum Baby shook a hand at me, sending sap everywhere, and begin to fold up the suit until it was the size of a sticky handkerchief. Then she tied the corners around her neck and draped it over her shoulders like a cloak. “Flow? Gum Baby just spat out a stream of water. Tasted nasty, too.”

I looked at the pool, remembered trailing my fingers through what I thought was fountain water, and grew nauseated.

“Anyway,” Gum Baby continued. “There’s a new mission. And should you choose to accept it—which you will, because Gum Baby didn’t spit out a gallon of dirty water for you to get a case of the shiver knees—we need to go now. You can even bring your friend.”

Junior and I glanced at each other. “He’s not my friend,” we both said at the same time.

“Jinx. Now you two can’t talk until Gum Baby says so. Let’s go. John Henry’s waiting.”

And with that, the tiny loudmouth stomped while—get this—muttering stomping sounds.

“Is she always like this?” Junior asked.

I sighed, nodded, then followed her. What choice did I have? She, apparently, knew where John Henry was, and if I was going to find out who the Shamble Man was, where he was keeping my grandmother, and why he apparently hated me, well (and I really hated to admit this)…I had to listen to Gum Baby.

Nyame’s palace reminded me of a shopping mall built out of sunsets and dreams. Golden walls rose out of polished stone floors so shiny I could see my reflection in them. More waterfalls spilled over doorways that led to rooms of all sizes. Bedrooms, chambers, halls, auditoriums, alcoves, atriums, and—more than I could count—sunrooms. Of course the sky god would have a bajillion sunrooms. I pictured Nyame sitting in a golden rocking chair while reading the paper and I snorted.

“Gum Baby knows you ain’t laughing.”

I looked up to find her sitting on Junior’s shoulder, the two of them apparently in mid-conversation. Something about seeing the two of them cutting up like old friends sent a hot spike through my chest. And thinking about that made me angry. Let her sit on his shoulder for a change. We’d see how he liked shampooing *his* hair seven times in a row to get all the sap out.

Gum Baby leaned next to Junior’s ear and started to whisper, looking back at me several times to make sure I was watching. “And then we were flying, and *somebody* was screaming his head off….” I rolled my eyes and kept walking.

We reached a large chamber with a huge doorway. I mean enormous. Another waterfall splashed down in front of it, and it was so large the noise was deafening. This room—it stood out like a pimple in the middle of a forehead. Black stone columns covered with intricate engravings framed the entrance that stretched all the way to the ceiling.

“Gee, I wonder who’s inside,” I said.

Gum Baby shook her head, her box braids flinging sap everywhere. “Some people just don’t listen. Gum Baby told you already. Three times!”

“No, it was just a…Never mind.”

Junior bit back a smile and I narrowed my eyes at him as I walked up to the waterfall door. I took a step forward—

And got knocked on my butt by a thousand buckets of water. Gum Baby shook her head at me, then hopped down, walked to the left side of the door while staring at me, and pressed a button I hadn't seen. Silently, but still shaking her head and maintaining eye contact, she marched back over to Junior, scrambled up onto his shoulder, and pointed. A giant seam seemed to split the wall of water in half as it slowly stopped falling.

"Now," she said, slowly, "do you want to try again?" Just

once I'd love to visit Alke and not get soaking wet.

We moved inside, and the first thing I noticed was how dark it was. It surprised me, because, well, Nyame was the sky god. I associated the light of the sun with him, from the clothes he wore to his golden eyes. But in here it was as if night had fallen and was here to stay. I could barely see a few feet in front of me, and we moved cautiously forward until—

"I'd say that's far enough."

The voice rumbled low from the far corner, shaking my bones and rattling my teeth. My heart swelled at its familiarity, even as the beginnings of unease tickled the back of my neck.

"John Henry?" I called. "It's me, Tristan."

A deep sigh sounded. "I reckoned as much. Knew when I saw you in the wall you'd find yourself here, some way, somehow."

I took another step forward. "I saw what happened, what the"—I looked around, then inched closer—"what the Shamble Man did to you. I need to find him."

A rumbling sound filled the room. It took me several seconds to realize that John Henry was chuckling. I could feel the vibrations in my feet! The tiny doll looked concerned, and Junior's eyes were wide as he moved behind me. Good. Not so tough now.

"Listen to you. I knew you'd find your strength, Tristan. Reckoned it'd take you a bit longer, but you're a leader. People look up to you. Might go so far as to say they depend on you." There was a creak in the darkness, like someone was shifting in their seat, and I frowned. But John Henry kept talking. "So I need you to hear me very carefully. Are you listening?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm listening."

"And who else is in here? Gum Baby? That you?"

"Gum Baby's right here." Her voice was so soft and full of worry that I looked at her. What did she know that I didn't? Was it the reason John Henry was staying here in the dark? How badly injured was he?

“I am here as well,” Junior said. He cleared his throat. “If that is all right, sir.”

John Henry grunted. “Told you about all that *sir* business. Nyame still ain’t letting you roam around?”

Junior kicked at the floor. “No.”

Now what did *that* mean? Why would Nyame want to keep an annoying know-it-all like Junior inside the palace? Was he grounded? Everyone seemed to know something about the skinny boy but me, and it was starting to get irritating.

“That’s just fine,” said John Henry. “You need to hear this, too, and all of you better listen.” He paused, and I felt the room go silent, like the calm before the storm, or the disappearing ocean before a tidal wave. Again I heard furniture creak.

“Don’t. Go. Looking. For. The Shamble Man.”

The words landed like hammer blows. I stared at the darkness in disbelief. How could he say that? Why wouldn’t John Henry want to find his attacker? What could scare John Henry? Was the Shamble Man in league with the Maafa and the iron monsters? I had so many questions and no answers, and my patience had worn thin.

“You don’t understand. He took my—” I began, but John Henry cut me off.

“Oh, but I do. Now’s not the time to be a hero, Tristan. It’s the time to be a leader. Sometimes them things ain’t the same.”

“But—”

“NO!” The shout rattled the stone walls, and dust fell on us. Heavy, labored breathing followed, then the creaking sound you hear when someone reclines on a bed. A long, drawn-out exhale came next.

“He’s dangerous, Tristan,” John Henry said. “You don’t know him like I do. He’s angry. At all of us, but you especially. Leave him alone in the Storm Lands. Right now he has my hammer, and I just…” His voice faded for a moment. When he spoke again, it was with the weariness of someone ready to accept defeat. “I asked Gum Baby to bring you here so I could tell you this, face-to-face. Leave this to the other gods. They’ll handle it.”

*He has my grandmother!* I wanted to scream, but before I could, the words John Henry had just spoken registered in my mind. What did he mean *They’ll handle it*? He wasn’t going to help? The only thing that could keep John Henry from standing up and doing what was right was if…

I squeezed the Gye Nyame charm on my adinkra bracelet and activated the powers of the sky god. When I opened my eyes, the entire room was revealed like a picture drawn in invisible ink. Gold-and-silver words outlined everything, from the floor to the walls to the ceiling. They wove together to give shape to the room, and I shook my head in disbelief. No matter how many times I used this power, I was amazed. Alke was really a giant story, and it was no wonder Anansesems were so revered here.

Then I saw the bed.

And the figure sprawled on top.

John Henry lay on his back, his head propped up by a pillow the size of an armchair. The massive god had his hands folded across his chest. From the waist up he looked fine. His story swirled about him, fragments of folktales collected into a legend so powerful it had inspired millions in this realm and in my own.

But his feet—especially his right one—were slowly disappearing. His story, which framed his body and made John Henry himself, was slowly unraveling and disappearing off into the darkness.

At first I thought something was wrong with my eyes. Or with the adinkra. Whatever this was, it had to be impossible, and I didn't want to believe. But as I watched, the god lying in the bed lifted his head and stared at me. In that moment I knew, and he understood that I knew. No wonder he was being kept in a dark room. No wonder everyone wanted to keep it hush-hush, so as not to start a panic. If it could happen to the leader of MidPass and one of the strongest gods in Alke, it could happen to any of them.

John Henry was starting to fade away.

# 16
# BUMBLETONGUE OVERBOARD

**MY FINGERS CLENCHED AND UNCLENCHED ON THEIR OWN.** Gum Baby and Junior let me be as we hurried down the hallway. They shot me glances every so often, but nobody spoke. The magnitude of what I'd seen tore through my mind, leaving me no chance to even think about forming words, let alone sentences. John Henry. Fading.

How had the Shamble Man's attack led to the unraveling of his story?

Before we left the giant folk hero, I'd promised him I was going to make things right, no matter what anyone said. "Would you just sit by if it was your grandmother?" I'd asked.

John Henry had only sighed and said, "I reckon I wouldn't. But that's what friends are for, Tristan. To help you see things you might've missed 'cause you're so fired up. Don't let your anger get ahold of you. Or else you might find yourself standing right alongside the Shamble Man. But I can't stop you. Just know, if you're not careful, you could make things worse."

I wasn't sure how things could get any worse. John Henry was down for the count. The Shamble Man had Nana. Had he hurt her, too?

Dozens of frightening answers to that question rattled around in my brain, leaving no room for anything else. I could barely manage to place one foot in front of the other, so it was a big surprise when a hand suddenly grabbed my shoulder and stopped me in my tracks.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I looked up in confusion at the sound of Junior's voice. We'd returned to the sitting room where Miss Sarah and Miss Rose had left us. Gum Baby

had scampered off somewhere, leaving me and the new boy to make idle small talk. Great.

"I'm fine," I said. "Where'd Gum Baby go?"

"She said something about getting the gang back together. I don't know. But stop trying to change the subject. You're not fine." His hand dropped away and returned to cradling the satchel he'd had slung over his back. "I can tell."

"Oh yeah?" I challenged. "And just how do you think you can tell?" He

shrugged. "Because I've seen that expression before. The one you're wearing right now. It's the expression you have when you realize someone you've looked up to isn't invincible. They aren't perfect. I've worn that expression. And I was in the room back there with you. Everyone knows the stories about you, Tristan. The boy with all the gifts from the gods. Your eyes went golden in the room with the big guy. That's Nyame's power— seeing the stories, right? So you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you saw something terrible in there. Something all the gods around here know and won't share. They won't tell me, and I'm guessing they didn't tell you, either. But you saw it. You *saw* it."

There was something in Junior's tone. Something raw. Jealousy? No, it was more subtle than that. He was envious. Of me. The realization jarred me out of the funk John Henry's state had put me in. I would give up all my powers if it meant I could have my grandmother back. I wanted nothing more than to walk with Nana back to our farm in Alabama and have everything return to normal.

"You wanna know what I saw?" I asked.

Junior nodded, a desperate hunger in his eyes. "I do."

I opened my mouth to tell him, then paused. The look on his face was something between fear and horrified anticipation. That's when I understood. The knowledge could hurt him. If the gods could fade, the people of Alke could fade. Weren't they stories, too? Granddad had said that people did funny things when faced with their own mortality. I didn't want to start a panic. *It's the time to be a leader.* The words of John Henry echoed in my ears. So I didn't tell the complete truth.

"John Henry is…sick," I finally said. "Sick?"

Junior searched my face. "Is it bad?"

I hesitated, then sighed. “Maybe. I don’t know. What I do know is that if I don’t find the Shamble Man, John Henry won’t be the only one suffering. That’s the number one priority right now.”

He nodded, then stopped and looked at my hands. “Hey, weren’t you wearing gloves before?”

I winced. This dude was sharp. I was hoping no one would notice I’d taken them off back in the room. “Yeah, I…Well, they were John Henry’s, and I wanted him to have them back.” What I didn’t tell him was that the gloves were imbued with the steel-driving man’s strength, and I thought they might restore a little bit of his power. It was a long shot, but I could hope.

Luckily, I was saved from having to explain anything more, because Gum Baby returned, this time on the shoulders of Ayanna, who was carrying a familiar rectangular piece of wood on her back. Unfortunately, it wasn’t in great shape.

“Your raft!” I said. “What happened to it?”

A thick crack wound its way through the magical craft. It had been smeared with pitch, and thin ropes were tied around it, trying to keep it from splitting any further.

Ayanna shot a stern look at Gum Baby, who was doing her best to avoid eye contact. “Someone was supposed to borrow it for an hour and ferry supplies to the workers rebuilding the market, but *somehow* that certain someone crashed into a minaret and nearly brought the whole tower down.”

“Gum Baby thought she saw a rainbow,” the little rascal said with a pout.

“Whatever happened, we have to go. Now,” I said. “Before someone comes along and tells us we’re being foolish.” I quickly summarized my exchange with John Henry, once more leaving out the details of his affliction. I didn’t know exactly how much Ayanna and Gum Baby knew, and a problem shared was a problem doubled. It was up to me alone to fix this.

“‘The Shamble Man is in the Storm Lands?” Ayanna said. “That doesn’t sound good. If he went where I think he did, we all might be in trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Storm Lands is a nickname for Nyanza, the City of Lakes in the Grasslands. According to Annie, a powerful goddess lives there. If the Shamble Man attacks her…”

Ayanna didn't finish the thought, but she didn't have to. The image of John Henry fading away was seared into my mind. "I have to make sure that doesn't happen," I said grimly.

"*We* do," Ayanna corrected.

"Yeah, stop hogging all the glory, Bumbletongue." Gum Baby was unfolding her sap suit and preparing to climb inside it again. We all stared at her, and she looked around. "What? Not yet? Oh, excuse Gum Baby, she thought it was business time. Y'all still lollygagging. Gum Baby's sorry, go ahead and waste a few more seconds. She'll wait."

I shook my head, but she was right. It was time to go. Before I took a step, Junior cleared his throat. "I can't go with you."

Ayanna frowned. "Why not?"

Personally, I didn't care. No one had invited him anyway. But I kept my mouth shut and tried to seem shocked. "Oh no, why not?"

He rolled his eyes at me. "Nyame wants me to stay where he can see me."

"Why does he care so much?" I asked. It was like Junior was on house arrest, which didn't exactly make me want to trust him.

Junior shrugged. "All I know is, if I stray more than a few yards away from the palace, our favorite sentry statues stomp around the Golden Crescent trying to find me, or Miss Sarah and Miss Rose swoop down out of nowhere and yell at me. But I can at least distract them for you. Give you a chance to get a head start."

"Oh," I said, surprised at his offer. "That's…actually pretty cool. Thanks."

Junior raised an eyebrow. "I'm not doing it for you." He turned and flashed his wide smile at Ayanna. "I'm doing it for *her*."

Ayanna had the nerve to blush.

Aaaaand just like that, it was time to go.

We found Keelboat Annie at the marina, on the deck of her boat, yelling at the water.

"I don't care if the waves itch! You better start actin' right or Imma give you more than an itch to worry about." The goddess looked up as I walked over with my eyebrows raised, Ayanna, Gum Baby, and Junior a few yards behind me. She'd changed into a long floral dress, and her hair was smoothed into a long braided ponytail that draped over her right shoulder.

When she shook her head, it twirled circles in the wind. "'Scuse all the yelling. Some rivers are just always complaining."

Behind me, Junior shuffled his feet. "Is she…arguing with the water?" I heard the boy whisper. "Orrrr…"

Gum Baby patted his ankle. She'd hitched a ride in the cuff of Junior's pants. Good luck to him getting out those stains later. The morning I returned from Alke, Granddad had looked at me for a solid five minutes when he'd caught me trying to wash the sheets from my first encounter with Gum Baby. You know the look. The *Boy, if you don't…*look. Then he walked off grumbling and shaking his head, and the next day I found two bars of soap and a brand-new washcloth stacked on the dresser in my room.

Ayanna held back a laugh as Gum Baby started lecturing Junior in a very serious tone. "Sometimes when a goddess and the magical body of water that carries her everywhere love each other, they argue. Gum Baby's seen it all the time. So no, it's not about you. Take a seat."

I jogged up to the boat. "Hey, Annie, do you think you can give us a lift? We have to get to the Grasslands region, and fast. To, uh…" I looked to Ayanna for help.

She snorted. "Nyanza."

"Right," I said. "Nyanza."

Keelboat Annie whistled. "Nyanza, huh? That's no pleasure jaunt. Especially with ole Frothy Bottom down there grumbling."

"Please," I said. "It's an emergency!"

"What, the big shots in the palace couldn't help you? You had to come back here to beg a ride from me?"

"No, no, nothing like that," I said, stumbling over my words as I tried to think of a way to placate a ticked-off goddess. "It's just—"

"BWA-HA-HA-HA-HAAA!" Keelboat Annie's laugh exploded out of her, and the whole boat shook as she threw back her head and slapped the hull. "Hoo-whee! The look on your face. Get on in here, y'all, it ain't no problem. Giving folks rides is what I do. Never let it be said Keelboat Annie is petty. Powerful, yes. Punctual, you betcha. But petty? I'll leave that to high-and-mighties in the palace."

Everyone climbed the ladder. As Ayanna stepped aboard, Keelboat Annie jerked her chin back at the tiller. "Don't get comfortable, Miss Thang —it's time for you to get some practice in."

"Me?" Ayanna said, her eyes wide.

“It’s what you’re here for, ain’t it? Besides, I’m not messing up my favorite dress.”

The pilot gulped, but she nodded and unstrapped her golden-tipped staff, whispered to the face on the end of it, then marched with grim determination to the tiller. She wasn’t planning on using that little thing as the keel pole, was she? I grinned, then stepped closer to Keelboat Annie. “Where’s…the SBP?” I asked in a low voice. No need telling everybody I let the Story Box and Anansi out of my sight.

Keelboat Annie made a face. “I left that thing beneath one of my old boots in a storage locker. Don’t need Mr. Web Butt doing something he ain’t supposed to. Go on and fetch him if you like. Good riddance.”

I quickly walked over to the locker that Annie had indicated, found the beat-up, funky boots she’d mentioned, gingerly pulled out the SBP, and let a sigh of relief escape my lungs. Anansi was still snoring in his web hammock, a strand of drool dangling from his mouth as his hat covered his eyes. Thank goodness. Everybody was where they were supposed to be.

Well, almost everyone.

When I returned to the railing, Junior continued to shuffle his feet on the dock, his toe tracing one of the worn carvings. From here he didn’t look as sure of himself as when he was talking junk on the beach. In fact, he looked…well, like a boy whose friends (AND I USE THAT TERM LOOSELY) were about to leave him behind. So while the others prepared for the trip, I called down to him, “You still worried about Miss Sarah or Miss Rose finding you?”

He scowled. “I’m not afraid.” Then the scowl disappeared and he said, “And they’re not that bad, really. They just worry. It’s really Nyame who’s always after me. I’m trying to avoid hearing any more lectures about my future, how I could be better than my father, blah-blah-blah.”

Now *that* I could understand. Grown-ups are always going on and on about the future, but it’s the *now* we have to suffer through. It’s hard thinking about next week when today is punching you in the face. Guess you get better at it the older you get.

I felt sorry for Junior. He was a bit of a jerk sometimes (a lot of times), but…I don’t know, sometimes when people are going through things, they act out. I’d gotten a lot of detention slips for fighting in school the weeks after Eddie died. I’d picked up on every insult, real or imagined. If Junior’s trouble with his father, whoever he was, was impacting him the same way,

maybe I had to give him another chance. What was it Keelboat Annie had muttered to herself? *Sometimes it's something deep in the water that's stirring things up on the surface.* That sounded like it could apply to humans, too.

"Okay," Ayanna called out. "We're ready! Wait, that isn't supposed to do that…. Oh, we're good!"

I made a snap decision. As Keelboat Annie moved around the deck loosening lines and doing her best to ignore Gum Baby stomping behind her and shouting out fake sailing orders, I gestured to the ladder.

"Come with us," I said to Junior. "Worst thing that can happen is they yell at you. Again."

Junior squinted at me suspiciously. When he realized I wasn't joking, he grabbed his hair with both hands. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"Ha! You aren't as stuck-up as they say you are." He scrambled up the ladder and then vaulted over the deck railing with one hand, the other firmly grasping his satchel. He punched me in the shoulder and jogged over to where Ayanna was gripping the tiller. He said something and she laughed, the tension slipping out of her shoulders.

"Smooth, ain't he?" Gum Baby appeared on the railing, walking it with both tiny arms outstretched like she was on a tightrope. "Gum Baby would hang with him any day."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, rubbing my shoulder and turning away. "Real smooth."

"Aw, don't be jealous, Bumbletongue. Gum Baby would hang with you any day, too. Well, no, it'd have to be a specific day. In the afternoon. Gum Baby can't deal with you first thing in the morning. So…let's say on Tuesday afternoons. That's when you can come hang out." She stared at me for a second and shook her head. "On second thought, make it *every other* Tuesday."

The boat rocked from side to side, and Keelboat Annie glared down at the clear blue water of the bay. "Don't you start with me," she warned.

I frowned. This was the second or third time she'd gotten upset with Old Man River, and the situation was beginning to set off warning bells in my head. I pinched the Anansi adinkra on my bracelet. It was warm. Not hot to the touch—just warm. What did that mean? Half an iron monster was

nearby? Somewhere a hullbeast was calling me names? What was I supposed to do with that?

Ayanna held out her staff behind her, whispering beneath her breath, and my eyes grew wide as Keelboat Annie's giant pole mimicked her actions. When Ayanna lifted her staff, the keel pole went up, too, and when she brought it down, the boat shifted beneath us, lurching awkwardly out of its slip in the marina. It moved in fits and spurts toward one of several river mouths that emptied into the bay, this one guarded by large boulders with deep shadows.

The boat tilted. "Sorry!" Ayanna called. Her face was creased with determination. "I thought that would be smoother."

I bit my tongue.

Gum Baby, however, did not. "Don't you get Gum Baby's hair wet! It ain't a wash day."

The staff lifted and descended carefully, and so did the keel pole. The boat jerked forward abruptly, then shook, and as we passed between the giant boulders, it began to pick up speed.

"Um…" I said as I grabbed the railing for dear life. Junior stumbled back over to where I stood, his jaw clenched as he stubbornly held on to his satchel instead of the hull. That boy needed to prioritize better.

"It's not me!" Ayanna said, her voice filled with panic. "Look, I'm not moving it!"

Sure enough, she held the staff up in the air, and the giant keel pole had risen out of the water, too. And yet the boat was steadily racing along the river, sloshing around curves and scraping across shallow bends.

The SBP vibrated as Anansi woke up. "What in the seven webs is going on? Boy, what have you done now?"

Beside me, Junior stiffened. I glanced at him, then showed him the phone screen. "Ignore him. He's just—"

But while I tried explaining how rude the trickster god could be, Junior dashed to the other side of the boat, slipping and sliding as he went. I stared in disbelief. What had I said?

Keelboat Annie shook her head, her eyes narrowed. "Something ain't right," she said quietly. "Let me take over, maybe Old Man River wasn't just hollerin' to holler earlier. Maybe if I—"

She didn't even have a chance to unbind the pole before the boat shot forward as if out of a cannon, throwing everyone to the deck. A huge wave

slammed over the railing, dousing everyone with ice-cold water, and the taste of something metallic got into my mouth. I spat it out, disgusted, then froze.

*Metallic.*

*Iron.*

“Wait a—” I began to shout, just as another wave washed over the railing, picked me up, and slammed my head into the deck. The world blurred. I felt the boat list to one side, and the last thing I heard was someone screaming as we all tumbled into the freezing river.

# 17
# KULTURE VULTURE

**BACK IN CHICAGO, OCCASIONALLY IN THE SUMMER WHEN IT GOT** really hot, one of the fire hydrants in the middle of my block would be opened. Sometimes the fire department would do it, swooping into the hood with their truck sirens off but the lights flashing, and one firefighter would toss out candy while another wrenched open the hydrant and let out a jet of water for us to cool off in. Other times, somebody from the block would do it. Kids would laugh and play in the spray, and even a few adults would dip their toes in.

Once, when I was very young and feeling brave, I stepped into the blast of water and it hit me in the chest like a freight train, knocking me over and sending me head over heels down the street until I crashed into a lamppost. Every now and again I remember that scary feeling of suddenly being out of control as some incredible force carried me away and I was powerless to do anything about it.

That's how I felt as the river swept me along.

My head was just barely breaking the surface, allowing me the chance to breathe. But I couldn't see anything but gray water, and a constant roar filled my ears. Old Man River was in pain—I could hear the cries of someone being forced to go to a place against their will. More water got into my mouth as I was propelled forward, and I just hoped it didn't have anything nasty in it. Like blood. Or flat soda. Bleeeeech.

"Oomph!" I gasped as I crashed into something round and solid. It felt like a light pole, and I grabbed it before I was carried away again. My legs

flailed behind me as the rushing current tried to pull me along, and my arms grew tired as I hugged that pole like it was my favorite teddy bear.

I mean…the stuffed animal I lost.

A long time ago.

And definitely wasn't still sitting on my bed back in Chicago.

ANYWAY…

Just when I felt my grip begin to give way, the water receded all at once, like someone had shut off the magical-river faucet, and I crumpled on the ground in exhaustion. It felt like the earth trembled beneath me when I landed, and I groaned.

"There's gotta be a better way to get around Alke," I said, wincing as I sat up, pausing as the ground shook again, just a little. What was going on? "First a fiery sinkhole, and now rivers with attitudes. What's next, blizzards that make fun of your haircut when you cross the mountain?"

No one laughed. Or said anything. I was alone. The mist slowly began to fade, and I saw that I was sitting on a patch of grass so green it looked fake.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Ayanna. Annie? Junior?"

No answer. Where had everyone gone? It's pretty hard to hide a twenty-foot magical riverboat. My backpack hung limply off my shoulders and I panicked, peeked inside, then let out a sigh of relief. The inner lining was waterproof. Nana's quilt, even though it was in tatters, was safe.

"Phew. Got scared there for a second." I patted my pocket and pulled out the SBP. "Anansi, where—"

I stopped mid-sentence and stared in horror at the phone.

"No."

It couldn't be.

"Ohhh no."

There, right down the middle of the screen, was a giant crack that ran from top to bottom. The phone was off, the screen dark and unresponsive. Worst of all, Anansi was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no."

When I flipped over the SBP, water dripped from between the edges of the screen and the back cover. Somehow the insides had gotten wet! But Anansi had said the SBP was waterproof. Had he been mistaken? Or lying? I couldn't put anything past him, but right then I'd have given my left arm to hear his advice about what to do next.

I had to dry out the phone, and fast.

As I sat there and worried (just a little) and panicked (okay, a lot) and tried to regain my breath, I looked around. The mist had disappeared completely.

"Sweet peaches."

The object I'd crashed into wasn't a light pole. It was the strangest tree I'd ever seen, with a straight, turquoise-colored trunk that seemed to ripple as winds gusted against it. The branches curved in the air like outstretched arms, and the leaves alternated between coral blue and emerald green depending on which way I turned my head. Other trees just like it grew nearby. Tiny ornamental shrubs and bunches of multicolored flowers grew between the trees, and tall, stiff stalks of grass covered the landscape everywhere else. It was a garden, a small and beautiful one, and for a moment I thought I was back above Nyame's palace in the Golden Crescent.

But there were no waterfalls, no view of the Ridge to the north, nor the bay and the Burning Sea to the south and west. Instead, there was a massive cloud system that covered the land, turning everything charcoal gray like a thick, drab curtain. Was this the storm we'd seen on the horizon?

"Enough sightseeing," I muttered to myself. I had things to do. Fix the SBP. Go to Nyanza and find the Shamble Man. Finally, I had to get my nana back. I got up filled with determination and marched through the garden to the…edge of the ground?

Wait a minute.

Nothing but gray sky surrounded me and the garden. Another gust of wind blew through the trees and I felt the earth tremble. I held my breath and gripped the tree nearest me as I leaned past it to look over the ledge.

"Ohhh," I said.

I hadn't landed on the ground—I'd landed on a roof.

A very-high-off-the-ground, wind-yanking-at-my-clothes sort of roof. "Ohhh nooo."

Far below, a nearly dry lakebed stretched as far as the eye could see. Brown mud and sand surrounded the few remaining pools of water, but the most amazing part? There was a city growing out of the middle of the lake.

You heard me right.

An honest-to-goodness city.

Single-story homes and tall skyscrapers rested on giant lily pads currently nestled in the mud, and enormous plants on the shoreline provided shade. Tall grass grew between the lily pads, while miniature forests topped the skyscrapers, like the one I'd apparently landed on. I was very thankful the tree had been there to keep me from falling off.

In the middle of it all, like a jewel set in a ring of amber and jade, was a large turquoise dome the size of a football stadium, sectioned and patterned like a tortoise shell. It looked like an upside-down bowl made out of a stained-glass window, bright and semitransparent, and even from this distance I could see more homes and buildings inside it.

Inverted emerald arches floated in the air above the dome, as if someone had drawn smiles in midair. They hovered in a circle like the tips of a crown. Every so often the ground would rumble, and a surge of water would come from a hole in the top of the dome. Very little of it landed in the lake. Instead, it went into the U shapes, where geysers shot the water into the clouds above the city. Not the huge thunderhead on the horizon, but smaller rain clouds that could feed the plains below.

All in all, this place was actually pretty cool.

Except for me having to cling to the tippy-top of a narrow roof. "Deep breaths," I said. "Deep breaths. You're fine. You are absolutely fine. You're talking to yourself while in a magical land with blue trees, but you're fine. Just…find a way down." I still clutched the damp SBP in my right hand, and I had the irrational urge to find a bowl of rice to drop it in. That's what fixed a wet phone, right? Rice? Or was it oats?

I was imagining the SBP sticking out of a bowl of oatmeal, with Anansi begging me to save him from his wholesome, cinnamon-flavored demise, when a shadow swept across the rooftop. A gust of wind carried a foul scent and something brushed my ear. I recoiled.

"Easy there, li'l fella," said a drawling voice behind me. "Easy there. Another half-drowned fish floppin' about. Stuck in the mud, huh? Just you lie still and don't wriggle around so much, and this won't hurt a bit."

I turned and froze.

A six-foot-tall bird with a wicked hooked beak and wings was perched on the tree above me, and it stared at me hungrily as it reached out with talons as sharp as knives.

This bird…this bird was enormous. Gigantic. Half dinosaur, maybe, I don't know. The weird monster had a bare head and wings the length of couches. It was covered in matted and droopy grayish-brown feathers and…

Wow.

Okay.

The bird wore tattered blue jeans that had been ripped into uneven shorts. But the weirdest and scariest thing (if that last sentence didn't terrify you enough) was that the creature wore a necklace of what looked to be trinket-covered bones.

A sickening odor drifted from the bird as it fluttered down to stand over me. It turned its head sideways so one large eye could swivel to examine me, and then it spoke, its huge hooked beak clacking with each word.

"Ahhh, *rehk,* what do we have, what do we have here? A flying worm? A floating deer? A meandering morsel on my side of town? Hoo-whee, *rehk rehk,* it's about to go down!" The bird did a little hop-step and flapped its wings. I gagged. That odor was *nasty*! And…was it rapping to me?

Just then I realized it wasn't alone.

A group of smaller birds—magpies, hawks, even a trio of chickadees— circled above, shouting out encouragement to what was apparently their leader.

"Get him, boss!"

"Tell him what the deal is!"

"Break it down for him on the one and three!"

Great. Hype men. Hype birds? Whatever.

The giant bird strutted forward and shook out its feathers. "What's the matter, dinner number two? You come to my home and think I wouldn't notice you? I run the Nyanza, baby, this my turf. Now just hold still, or this'll hurt much worse."

Nyanza. So I had made it to the City of Lakes. But…that was in the Grasslands. How had I ended up so far away from the Golden Crescent? What had Old Man River been thinking? And where was everybody else?

"I'm talking to you, little grub."

I didn't think it was wise to insult a creature that looked like it could rip me to shreds in any number of ways, so I just shook my head and covered my nose and mouth with the crook of my elbow.

"Who are you?" I asked in a muffled voice.

“Me?” The bird hop-stepped again. “Me? *Rehk rehk,* I’m the bird with the word! The deacon of speakin’, the chaplain of what’s happenin’. You can’t get flyer than me, my little snack, and it’s not just because of these wings. I coast on the rhythm and soar on melodies. You can call me DJ Kulture, with a *K*. Throw a ‘sir’ at the end to put some respect on my name.”

Okay, first of all, I didn’t like the way the bird—DJ Kulture, or whatever—kept referring to me as some sort of meal. Second, I *definitely* didn’t like the way his talons clicked closer with every little hop. I needed to get off this roof and down to solid ground, but there was no way I was jumping from this high up. Where was Ayanna’s raft, or even Thandiwe with her forebear when I needed it? I would’ve given anything, even some of their good-natured ribbing, to have their help right now.

The bird flapped again. Those wings dwarfed me—he could probably carry me to his nest or wherever he lived and eat me there if he chose.

Wait.

Carry me.

A plan began to form in my mind. A stupid plan. Possibility of dying: 85 percent. But it was the only thing I could think of. I scooted backward until I rested against a tree and then slowly stood up to my full height. The bird hopped, twisting his head to the left and to the right, switching which large eye studied me. “Okay,” I said, peeking behind me quickly and grimacing at the long drop to the muddy ground below. “Okay, Mr. Deacon of Speaking, you think maybe you could help me get down from here? I landed—”

The bird threw his head back and let out a screech. It wasn’t until I saw his feathers quivering and his head bobbing up and down that I realized he was laughing. At me.

Anger bubbled up in my chest and I folded my arms. “What’s so funny?”

The bird clacked his beak and cocked his head at me. “You, my little smug smorgasbord. Only way down for you is through my beak and into my stomach.”

*Remember the plan.* I pressed my back against the tree as the bird flapped his wings. “I didn’t think crows ate people,” I shouted over the gusts of foul air.

“Crows?! Crows?!” The flapping stopped and DJ Kulture hopped angrily from foot to foot. “Do I look like a *rehk rehk* featherbrained marble chaser? I’m a flesh-rippin’ raptor! A buzzard ballin’ from the egg to the nest, you understand me? A crow? Why, little boy, I oughta—”

I couldn’t help it. Really, I couldn’t. I started to laugh. “Wait. Wait. A buzzard? As in a vulture? DJ Kulture Vulture? With a *K*?” I started laughing again as the stinky monster flapped and squawked in rage.

The bird’s cocky attitude and manner of speaking began to change as he got angrier and angrier. “I am not *a* vulture. I am *the* vulture. An avian aeronaut who rules the skies. Perhaps you’ve heard of me? I’m the one who chased those metal beasts back to the sea from whence they came. I’m the savior of the skies, the one who extinguished the burning seam in the sky with a flap of my wings.”

Hold up.

This bird was taking credit for things my friends and I did! And, to make matters even worse, the necklace looked familiar. *Reeeally* familiar. I recognized some items around his neck. A few of them, at least. Kulture Vulture had taken trophies from around Alke—as far as I could tell—and collected them in a necklace. There was a lifeless brand fly and a small fetterling. There was a kierie from the Ridge and strands of the Thicket, all of them twisted and shaped around bleached-white tiny skulls and finger bones.

“If it wasn’t for *me,*” Kulture Vulture continued, “the web-spinner would never have been found.”

That did it. I whipped out the SBP, intending to show Anansi how this… this thief was taking our exploits—no, *my* exploits—and twisting the narrative so he was the hero. Unbelievable! But when I looked at the screen, my shoulders slumped. I’d forgotten it wasn’t working.

“My, my, my,” Kulture Vulture said, suddenly so close I could see each dirty, dingy feather on his chest quiver as he spoke. “What is that? Hoo-whee, you’re full of surprises, little morsel. Maybe I’ll—Oh, no you don’t!”

Before I could slip the SBP back in my pocket, Kulture Vulture lunged forward, snagging the phone with his beak and retreating with a flapping hop-step backward.

“Hey!” I shouted.

The bird let out a harsh *rehk rehk* and turned to flap away with his prize.

I threw caution to the winds…I had no other choice. I dashed forward, lowering my head, and leaped at the bird. I grabbed Kulture Vulture around the neck and we tumbled off the roof.

I'd ridden on the back of a shadow crow the size of a bus. I'd ridden on a magical flying raft and a metal shield that converted into a hoverboard. I'd ridden the L train in Chicago—red, blue, orange, you name it, I'd ridden in cars you wouldn't be caught dead in. This—and I cannot stress this enough—was the worst of them all. Riding on the back of a screeching, grown-man-size vulture that smelled like he had rolled around in spoiled meat (right before he ate it) was enough to make me wanna puke. And I would have, if not for the fact we were hurtling to the ground at a kajillion miles per hour. Anything I unleashed would just splatter right back into my face.

How's that for a mental image?

"*Reeeekh!* Get off, get off!"

Kulture Vulture's words whipped by my ears, barely audible as the wind rushed past us. At least the bird wasn't trying to rap anymore. His wings flapped wildly as he attempted to steer himself. An emerald U went whizzing by, nearly clipping a wing. Another roof zoomed up at us, heavily carpeted in a green tangle of vines, but we shot past that, too. If I ignored the gorgeous rooftop gardens, the kaleidoscopic jeweled windows, and the crystal balconies that jutted out every so often—invisible if you didn't look at them at a precise angle—it would have looked like I was dive-bombing downtown Chicago. That's how many skyscrapers were bunched together, plants growing out of every surface.

"Give me back my phone!" I shouted.

*"Rehk rehk!"*

The ground was approaching fast. Old Stinky Beak spread his wings wide, trying to slow down, and at the last second, just as we reached the blue-green surface of the pond, I leaped to my feet and kicked off of the giant feathery back. The bird squawked in outrage before he plunged into the water, while I landed heavily on the shore. Pain shot through my right wrist, and I winced as I got to my feet. I could still move it, but it definitely felt sprained and throbbed every time I took a step.

I groaned as my sneakers squelched in thick mud. "Every. Single. Time. Next time I'm wearing sandals. Or swim shoes. Apparently you can't be fly

and save the world."

The back of my neck prickled, and I stopped talking. It felt like someone was watching me. I looked around, cupping my hand over my eyes to block the glare from the jewellike windows of the dome. Nothing. Not a trace of anyone.

Except Kulture Vulture. He spluttered in the water and flapped his way out, until he stood dripping wet in front of me with a furious expression on his face.

I dropped into a fighting crouch with both fists up. "Give me back the phone," I growled. "Now."

I seriously needed the SBP. I had to figure out a way to fix it. If not, I was stuck out here with no way to get help, no way to find Nana, no way for anyone to find me, and no way to get back to my world, leaving me with nothing to do but wait around and hope that eventually I'd be rescued.

"*Rehk!* A phone?! A phone?! You could've killed the both of us, and you're worried about that trinket?" The vulture shook his feathers, sending droplets everywhere. "I ought to rip you apart and slurp the marrow from your bones. Do you know who I am? I…"

The musty buzzard continued to shout threats as he shook his wings dry. The sensation of being watched came over me again. From every direction. There *were* people around, I knew it. Why didn't they come help me? What were they waiting for?

I didn't have a chance to shout for help. Kulture Vulture flapped closer, and I noticed something peculiar about the necklace around his neck. It was shimmering like heat rising from asphalt. I closed my eyes, then reopened them while holding Nyame's adinkra.

The vulture had stopped shouting and was staring at me, his head cocked to the side again. "What's wrong with you?" he asked. "Why's your eyes glowing?"

I ignored him and studied the necklace with growing horror. What I'd thought were simple knickknacks, little charms and trinkets, were actually pieces of people's stories. Dull gold words twisted around them, fragments of sentences and phrases linked by the chain of bones. MY LOVE, MY HEART WILL ALWAYS BE snaked around a dark metal heart-shaped bangle. TO MY BEST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE curled around a locket. Something told me none of these items had been given to the buzzard willingly.

“I’m through playing around with you!” the vulture said. “Just who do you think you are, coming into my territory and messing with me? With me! Don’t you know who I am? I rule this miserable mud puddle, little worm. Me! And you think you can muscle me out?”

The necklace wiggled as the bird-monster flapped in anger. Part of it was hidden, stuck beneath a clump of matted and muddy feathers. It captivated me. I found myself fixated on learning what that last trinket was. The vulture spread his wings wide in preparation to fly at me, and the necklace jostled into view.

There it was.

The gold-and-black trim, the sleek and reflective case.

The SBP.

But what I didn’t expect to see, what forced a strangled cry to escape, formed from frustrated anger and fear and desperation all at once, was a familiar, slightly bent golden quilting needle twisted around a small bleached-white bone.

# 18
# BIRDS OF A FEATHER

**NANA.**

Kulture Vulture had seen Nana! I was sure of it. At some point the mangy-feathered bird must've run (or flown) into the Shamble Man—recently! I had to figure out where she'd been taken. Was she okay? The image of John Henry fading, fragments of his story drifting off him like ash from a burned house, gripped my heart and squeezed.

My fists clenched even tighter at the thought of that foul-mouthed birdbrain touching *anything* of Nana's. The water of the very shallow lake sloshed around my ankles as I widened my stance. Kulture Vulture screeched a challenge, flapped his mud-spattered wings, and launched himself at me in a rush of feathers and lake water.

"I'm going to tear you apart, little worm! Your fingers will be my appetizers. Your kneecaps will be my dessert! Your—bluurrgggh." He spluttered as I kicked a glob of sand and mud into his face. Ain't no rules in street-fighting. Or…lake-fighting, I guess. The large bird fell with a splash, flailing his giant dirty wings in an attempt to clear the dirt from his eyes and beak.

"Where's my grandmother?" I shouted.

Kulture glared at me with eyes that streamed tears. "What are you sniveling about?"

"My grandmother. That needle on your necklace—that was hers."

"Everything around my neck is mine, worm. *Rehk rehk,* whatever claim you think you have on it is gone. No more. Finished, you hear? You're looking at the baddest, flyest, most talented bird with the word. Whoever

you're looking for I can't help you with, but I can promise you one thing— you found a world of hurt."

He flapped his wings as if getting ready to take off. I wasn't going to give him the chance.

I dashed forward, lifting my knees high to clear the water in chopping steps. I guess there was a benefit to Granddad's training on the shores of Lake Michigan. I covered the ground between me and my feathery foe in a couple seconds and squeezed my fists to make the akofena shadow gloves appear, ready to launch an attack.

A sharp pain stabbed my right wrist. I'd forgotten I'd injured it during the fall.

"Ah!" I shouted, grimacing in agony. The gloves pulsed briefly before they began fading from view. Their power wasn't working! But it was too late to pull them back now, so I made the best fist I could make and threw a flurry of punches. Several connected. Kulture Vulture's bald pink head snapped back, and flecks of mud went flying. But the giant bird remained on his feet and snapped at me. I shifted my weight, turned my hips, and fired a straight left. Again the punch connected…but the bird wasn't going down. He tried to rake me with a talon. My backpack, with my provisions and Nana's quilt pieces inside, threw off my accuracy, and the blows weren't connecting like they should have. I was just about to launch a third attack when Kulture Vulture leaped high in the air; with two massive flaps he flew awkwardly into the sky, sending water and mud everywhere.

"*Rehk,* you miserable maggot! Who do you think you are?" The vulture flew in a wide circle, his shadow sliding over the surface of the lake like an oil slick. Above him, the storm lurked in the distance, promising to deliver punishment to whoever remained standing. "I will strip the flesh from your bones and use you as a puppet!"

The smaller birds, who until this point had given their boss a wide berth, now flapped around me, preventing me from escaping. I shielded my head from their onslaught as they shouted insults and encouraged their leader.

"That's right, make a puppet outta him, Kulture!"

"Don't let the groundworm getcha, boss!"

"Ooh, you gonna let him rough you up like that?"

With one more powerful flap, Kulture Vulture dove out of the sky, wings folded against his back and talons outstretched. I tried to dodge, but when I moved my head to the left, my feet went to the right, slipping on the

muddy lake bottom. Luckily the talons missed my face, but they snagged on my hoodie and yanked me farther off-balance.

*SPLASH!*

I toppled into the lake face-first and swallowed a mouthful of mud.

You heard me.

Swallowed. Mud.

"Bleeeech!" I spat out a couple of pebbles and a wriggling something I didn't want to think too hard about. My clothes were completely soaked again. I wiped sand from my eyes and looked around. Kulture Vulture was nowhere to be seen, and his bird brigade was hooting and chirping. My legs wobbled as I got to my feet. I was so tired, it felt like I was wading through cement. This couldn't go on much longer. I had to find Nana. I had to stop the Shamble Man, and…and…and…

Exhaustion dragged me down to one knee in the water.

And that's when Kulture Vulture struck.

*Whumph!*

It felt like one of Reggie's punches hammering into my ribs. The buzzard's talons gripped me around the chest, backpack and all, and yanked me into the air. Giant dusty-black wings flapped on either side of me as a loud screech rang in my ear.

"*REHK!* Where's all the big words now, little worm? You're not so tough up here, though you squirm!"

Oh, for the love of—The rapping was back.

As Kulture Vulture failed all of hip-hop in this realm and mine, the ground dropped farther and farther away, until I could see a series of nearly dry lakes stretching to the horizon, the emerald city rising in the middle with the U-shapes floating above it. Every so often a thundering surge of water would come from the octagonal dome, filling the half rings on their way into the clouds.

It was beautiful.

I would've loved to watch them a little longer, but, you know, I was trying not to get eaten.

"You like falling out of the sky so much, why don't you try it some more?" With that, the talons let go, and I started plummeting to the ground. The lakes tumbled wildly as I flipped head over heels and back again. I tried to scream, but the wind ripped the sound from my mouth. The muddy

surface of the water raced toward me, and at the last moment I closed my eyes and braced for impact.

Sharp talons snagged me once again, and I grunted in pain.

"No, little worm, I'm not done with you yet. I like to play with my food a little before I start to nibble." This time Kulture Vulture had me facing upward, my back to the ground, so I could see him leering at me. A purple snakelike tongue ran over his beak, and I shuddered. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the bird brigade returning, and they squawked and hooted as they followed us.

"What's the matter, little grub? Catbird got your tongue? That's a shame —I was planning on eating that delicacy last. Well, if you don't have anything more to say, I guess the party's over, hmm? Unless it's a dinner party…In that case, you're cordially invited!" His yellow eyes narrowed in anticipation. "I insist."

I wriggled left and right, struggling to free myself, but Kulture Vulture's grip was like iron. His beak snapped inches from my face as he leered down at me. I couldn't escape. This was it. The end of Tristan Strong, one-time hero and a failure of a grandson. Cause of death: digestion.

Kulture Vulture's feathery friends laughed and jeered at my efforts, calling out helpful tips to mock me.

"Wriggle around some more, little worm, you almost

got it!" "Ooh, that was close!"

"I can't wait for Kulture to tell this story."

I spotted something in the distance. A dark spot racing beneath the clouds. It was going to be the last thing I saw before a giant beak devoured me whole.

Kulture lowered his head, his fowl breath (Get it? No? Not the time? Oh, okay.) making me gag…when a rock whizzed through the air and clacked off the bird's giant beak. He squawked and lost his momentum. Another rock hit him, and another, and soon a hailstorm of smooth stones the size of my fist began to pelt Kulture Vulture. With wings flapping awkwardly, he dropped out of the sky, and we splashed into a giant mud puddle. I scrambled away, kicking and swinging as the bird brigade began to dive and swoop to harass me.

Then the rocks started hitting them, too.

*Bink*

*Bink*

*Bink*

Three rocks thrown, three birds from Kulture's goon squad sent flapping in outrage to the mud below. It was unbelievable. I'd never seen anyone aim so well. I could barely get my trash into the trash can. The rest of the birds stopped attacking me and started to retreat. One by one they changed course, flying away as more rocks chased them off.

"Hey!" Kulture Vulture shouted after his winged goons. He stood wobbly on his legs and shook his feathers. "Get back here, you cowards! They're just three little morsels!"

*Three?*

Just then, a familiar voice rang out. "Tristan!"

I turned to see Ayanna, staff gripped in her hand like a baseball bat, running through the mud toward me. And, to my extreme surprise, Junior was following. The boy had his satchel slung around in front of him, one hand inside it, the other holding a stone like the ones that had just whizzed through the air.

Kulture Vulture let out a deafening squawk, and his gang of feathered flunkies wheeled around and flew sheepishly back toward us. Soon we'd be outnumbered again. Kulture Vulture turned to us and clacked his beak.

"That's it!" the buzzard shouted. "I played with you for too long and you got a couple more morsels to join you. Between the three of you I might get a decent meal." With that, the giant monster bird bent over, wings low to the ground, wicked hooked beak aimed directly at my face. But behind him, over his head, I saw that weird silhouette in the sky again, and this time it was closer. It moved in an odd fashion, jerking to the left and right.

It couldn't be…

"Tristan! What are you doing?" Ayanna shouted.

I rolled my head. "Follow my lead," I said. "When I give the signal, attack."

"You have an idea?"

"Something like that."

"That's inspiring," Junior muttered. "Are all your heroic speeches like that?"

I ignored him. At the moment, I needed his aim. Ayanna brandished her staff and Junior hefted his stone. Me? I couldn't make a proper fist with my right hand to engage the akofena, but that didn't mean I was helpless. As

Kulture raced forward, I leaped into action, sprinting to meet him. Knees high, just like Granddad taught me. The timing had to be perfect. If I arrived too soon, my plan would fall apart. Too late, and I'd be eaten. I guess that counts as my plan falling apart, too.

Luckily, I was right on time.

I skidded to a stop, spread the fingers of my left hand, twisted around, and slapped the giant bird.

Everyone stopped.

"Did you just—" Ayanna began to ask.

"Did you just smack him?" Junior interrupted.

The smaller birds flapped overhead, stunned into silence. Kulture Vulture brought one wing to his head, then looked at me, confused. "You slapped me!" he said in an accusatory tone.

"I did." I folded my arms across my chest and shook my head in exaggerated disappointment. "You left me no choice."

"But—"

"Honestly, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Coming out here and terrorizing everyone and you haven't even brushed your teeth. The nerve."

Kulture Vulture's eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head. "I don't have teeth!"

"That's what happens when you don't brush. Just like my grandmother always said."

One of the bird flunkies snickered, and the giant vulture let out a screech of frustration. "*REHK REHK!* That's it! I've had it. I'm not playing with my food anymore. First the old woman talked my beak off before the Shamble Man came back for her from that ole shining city over there, and now you. Birds of a feather. Well, now it's time to get plucked. Get over here!"

I inhaled sharply. So Kulture *had* seen Nana. And the Shamble Man. "You tried to eat my grandmother?"

The vulture shuddered, his muddy feathers flinging dirt everywhere. "Naw, little worm, not to my taste. Besides, that masked giant said she was off limits. You, on the other hand…" With a huge flap of his massive wings, Kulture lunged for me. But he'd waited too long. Just behind him, swooping down from the clouds, came our savior.

"Now!" I shouted.

Junior tossed a stone in the air and Ayanna batted it like a designated hitter. It smacked Kulture Vulture right in the eye and the bird reared back. Junior's hands were already pulling more stones from the satchel. He whipped them through the air so fast, they hummed as they passed me. The buzzard stumbled and fell, and I dashed forward, snatched his necklace, and dove away. I stashed the goods in my backpack for safekeeping.

Kulture Vulture squawked in outrage and tried to get up, but he couldn't while the rocks were still raining down. Finally he staggered to his feet and took to the air, spiraling up to get out of range—

Right into the path of Gum Baby on Ayanna's flying raft.

"PRECOFFINARY MEASURES!" the tiny doll yelled. The raft was covered, and I mean covered, in sap. Mounds of it. Gooey strands trailed from it like tentacles on a jellyfish. The vessel jerked left and right, snaring Kulture Vulture and his crew in one giant sticky knot. They flapped and struggled in vain. I winced, knowing from firsthand experience just how secure that sap was.

When she got close to us, Gum Baby backflipped off the raft as it shot into the sky. I was so busy waving cheekily at the birdbrains that I failed to notice where she planned on landing until it was too late. Big mistake.

"Oomph!"

Ayanna and Junior snickered as Gum Baby peeled herself off my head —ripping out a patch of hair as she went—and slid down into my hood. She patted my cheek, smearing sap on my face in the process. "Did you miss me?"

"No," I said, groaning as I scrubbed at my skin. "And what about the raft? How are we supposed to get around?"

"'How are we supposed to get around?'" Gum Baby mimicked in a whiny voice. "Gum Baby just saved your muddy behind and this is the thanks she gets? Rude."

Ayanna intervened before the argument could continue. "Thank you, Gum Baby, you were wonderful."

"Yeah," Junior said, offering the little loudmouth a short bow. "At least you did something."

"Hey, all this was my plan!" I said.

Junior whistled. "Some plan. Let everyone else do the work after you make the monster mad. Good job with that."

“Anyway,” Ayanna said, glaring at us both, “the raft will return in a little bit. Not that it’ll be good for much.”

I hoped Gum Baby looked sheepish, but I couldn’t see her.

“In the meantime, we walk,” Ayanna finished. She set off, skirting the muddy water, and headed to where the emerald city of Nyanza sparkled in the distance. Junior followed, and Gum Baby snuggled down into my hoodie and yawned.

“Be a good Bumbletongue and carry Gum Baby. It ain’t like you’re carrying your own weight around here anyway.” And before I could think up a response, she started snoring, leaving me gritting my teeth as we trekked off to find my grandmother.

# 19
# THE CITY OF LAKES

**“LOOK, GUM BABY SAID SHE WAS SORRY!”**

After we’d slogged for nearly an hour through the receding lakes of Nyanza, with the emerald city barely getting any closer, Ayanna’s floating raft finally returned to her. Dingy feathers covered it from front to back, stuck in sap. I didn’t know what had happened to Kulture Vulture and his gang, but they’d sure left a mess. It looked like a turkey had exploded in an oven filled with hamburger grease.

Yep. Think about it.

Ayanna touched her golden staff to the vessel and whispered. Slowly the sap melted and most of it slid off, taking the feathers with it.

“Come on,” she said, and we all climbed aboard. “Gum Baby, you steer while I get the rest of this cleaned up.”

Junior took up a position near the front of the raft, out of the way. I watched him get settled. Something was still bothering me about him, but between Gum Baby’s terrible flying skills and my desperate efforts to avoid sitting in sap, I couldn’t focus on one moody boy at the moment. And, as if those discomforts weren’t enough, a giant thunderstorm lurked low and menacing on the horizon, back to the west. Thick, ugly gray clouds. We cruised (if you could call it that) closer and closer to the domed city. I had time to actually examine it and the surrounding area—you know, without being attacked by flying appropriators.

The dome wasn’t completely sealed like I’d originally thought. I could vaguely make out the shapes of houses inside through seams in the glass,

and smoke escaped from cleverly designed chimneys that were invisible from above. Plants grew out of cracks in the giant jade tortoise shell and snaked their way to the lake below, where huge lily pads with flowers the size of canoes awaited. In fact…I narrowed my eyes…they *were* canoes— giant flower canoes with big leaves that doubled as paddles. It looked like the lily pads were actually docks. Floating driveways for a city built on a lake.

If only the lakes weren't drying up.

"Who lives there?" I asked Ayanna in a low voice.

She poked at a stubborn clump of stuck feathers with a grimace, then sighed. "This is going to take forever. Maybe I should—What did you say? Who lives where? Oh…Well, rumor has it another goddess is inside. Like Keelboat Annie in a way, she managed to keep her people safe from the iron monsters by drastic means."

I frowned. "But Annie went on the run—her and Old Man River."

"Yes, and—you didn't hear this from me—I heard this goddess shut down the whole City of Lakes."

I'd just opened my mouth to ask what that meant when the raft shuddered again.

"Can you fly straight?" Junior's comment grabbed my attention. Gum Baby's as well.

"Gum Baby is a pilot. Put some respect on her name."

The exchange brought my attention back to our current sticky situation. I turned to watch Gum Baby struggle with the rudder at the rear of the raft, racing from one side to the other to keep it in line, sometimes going so far as to jump on top of it and wrestle it into position. I didn't let out a single chortle, though. Not a one.

Gum Baby looked up at me anyway. "You laughing at Gum Baby, Bumbletongue? Better not be. Gum Baby'll snatch that smile of yours and use it as floss."

I raised my hands in the universal gesture of *Couldn't be me* and fought to keep a straight face.

Junior looked back and forth between us, his eyebrows raised. "Why *did* they make you a pilot?" he asked her.

Gum Baby let go of the rudder and stood proudly with her hands on her hips, only to yelp and leap for the raft's controls when we started to nosedive. "'Cause Gum Baby deserves! Took them long enough. Gum Baby

had to do two more missions before they'd give her a chance, and then old Shovel Hands Henry said it was only temporary, that Gum Baby needed to prove herself some more. As if Gum Baby ain't the best at whatever she chooses to do." She sniffed, then squinted at the edge of the raft, eyed the rudder, dashed to peek over the side to see where we were headed, then raced back to the rudder before we crashed. "Gum Baby's a pro."

I snorted, then went back to scanning the area for signs of the Shamble Man or Nana, or anything that would give me a clue as to what to do next. It pained me to say it, but without Anansi I was lost.

I couldn't help it. I pulled out the phone one more time, just to check.

Nothing.

"Ooh, Gum Baby's gonna teeell." The raft dipped suddenly as the tiny terror abandoned the rudder and scrambled up to my shoulder to examine the broken phone. "You didn't have a scream protector? Wow, Bumbletongue, you must be rich-rich. Guess you're just gonna buy another one of those magical phones made from the precious treasure and heirloom of the gods. Oh, wait…"

The glare I bestowed upon the sticky nuisance could've curdled milk, even if she was right.

"I have a *screen* protector," I said, "but—"

"Whoa, you broke the Story Box?" Ayanna asked, interrupting me. She stepped over to look, and Junior peeked as well. "What is Nyame going to say?"

"Nothing," I said, "because I'm going to get it fixed before he finds out."

"Boy, whatever," Gum Baby said. She hopped down, returned to the rudder, and pointed at a shiny button on the left strap of her overalls. "People can't trust you with nothing. That's why you don't even have a badge! When Gum Baby became a pilot, she got one. You're looking at Pilot Gum N. B. Baby."

I frowned. "What does the *N. B.* stand for?"

"Nunya Business, that's what. Always nosy. This why people don't invite you anywhere. Always—"

*Thump*

The impact threw us to the floor of the raft in a tumbled heap. I groaned, a weight on my head pushing my face into the rough and sticky wooden planks. It took me a second to realize that Gum Baby had landed on me.

“Gerroff!” I said in a muffled shout.

“Hush, boy. Your big ole head is like a couch. Gum Baby could put her feet up and stretch out.” But the tiny terror hopped off with a sticky *plop*, and I winced. You ever have a bandage yanked off? That’s what it felt like. Pretty sure another patch of hair was missing thanks to her. Gum Baby peered around, then dusted her hands, her coal eyebrows bunching into a frown when they got stuck together. “Perfect landing,” she said. “Ten out of ten.”

We’d crashed into one of the giant lily pads resting on the shallow lake that held the emerald dome. Ayanna and Junior jumped off the raft and I followed. We climbed the bank to find a dry creek bed as wide as a street. It led to the city.

“Why is all the water gone?” I muttered. “And where are the people?” No one answered. Gum Baby scrambled up to my shoulder, and Ayanna readied her staff, while Junior pulled a stone from his satchel. (How many did he have in there, anyway?) We crept forward. The silence was unnerving. No chatter, no animals, no sound from the city whatsoever.

It was as if Nyanza had been abandoned.

We crested a small hill, still inside the creek bed, to find a solid green metal gate blocking our path. Beyond it, a waterfall splashed down, rainbow-colored and as loud as thunder. It shrouded the area in a fine mist we couldn’t see past.

“A sluice gate,” Ayanna said, her eyes wide. “Keelboat Annie told me about them. They control the flow of water, and not even Old Man River can get through one that’s lowered. Looks like these people really want to keep everyone else out.”

I thought about that as we walked closer to examine the gate. What would make folk want to guard against a magical river? Did this have something to do with all the dried-up lakes and streams in Nyanza? Or with the Shamble Man?

Just as we reached the gate and the clumps of wild grass growing on either side of it, a bright blur streaked past my face.

*Thunk!*

“That’s far enough!”

The shout surprised me, but not as much as the blue-green spear that now quivered in the ground in front of us. A rope attached to the end of the spear’s shaft trailed up the riverbank and disappeared behind the high grass.

I looked for the thrower but didn't see anyone. I'd started to step forward to investigate when another spear whizzed through the air and landed near us. I scuttled backward, and a third *thunk*ed into the ground behind me, cutting off my retreat.

We clustered together, staring around. No attackers revealed themselves. Had Kulture Vulture returned with reinforcements?

"Into the canal, all of you," a second voice said, just as the giant sluice gate groaned open, clear blue water splashing through to fill the creek bed up to our ankles. "Now!"

I gulped, a sinking *Here we go again* feeling in my stomach, and waded through.

Gorgeous.

Incredible.

Breathtaking.

Those were just a few of the words rattling in my head as we walked into Nyanza. Not right away, mind you. At first, the City of Lakes wasn't nearly as awe-inspiring as Isihlangu or the Golden Crescent. We sloshed through a dim tunnel until we reached a scuffed gray door without a handle. I eyed it with dread as we approached, hoping it wasn't an entrance to a prison. It opened automatically when we got near, and we stepped through to enter the world within the dome. My jaw dropped and my breath caught in my throat.

Sunlight drifted down in different shades of green to bathe everything in a soft glow. Small trees grew in a field on my left—an orchard of some sort. I didn't recognize the fruit, but the fragrance of something light and sweet reminded me that I hadn't eaten in a while. In front of us, a wide avenue lined with gently bending stalks of giant wildflowers led over a hill and into the middle of town, where structures that were half-building, half-plant grew toward the light. I raised my eyes to the dome high above, inhaling the scents of this incredible oasis.

It was so peaceful.

At least, it would have been if not for the tension lurking just beneath the beauty. We marched with our invisible guards calling out instructions every few steps.

"Take this footbridge."

"Step lively now."

But the voices floated to us without a glimpse of their speakers. Every so often I heard a rustling just to the side of the road we walked on, and I thought I caught a glimpse of more of those sharp spears, but every time I squinted into the brush, I couldn't see anything except waist-high grass waving in the steady warm breeze that carried traces of citrus and honey.

Were we being taken captive? I wondered. I didn't have time for that—I needed to find Nana.

Just when I thought I couldn't walk any longer, we reached the top of the hill and my complaints were forgotten. The city sprawled below like one of Nana's quilts, a sparkling weave of sapphire-blue streams, multilevel rows of plant-houses, and dozens of colorful orchards filled with fruit-laden trees.

And, in the middle of it all, resting on a huge gilded lily pad that floated in the air, defying gravity, was a dazzling palace the same shade of emerald green as the dome high above us. Water that sparkled like diamonds cascaded over the edges of the lily pad and collected in dozens of lakes and ponds at the bottom of the dome. It had to be the source for all the streams in the city.

The City of Lakes indeed.

But with all this water inside, why was the land outside so dry? Was Nyanza hoarding water? As the questions floated around my head, I wanted to stay and drink (ha!) in the sight forever, but I was still wondering about something.

"Hey," I said. "Where is everyone?"

Our invisible guards didn't answer me. Not that I was expecting them to. Ayanna looked around at the darkened homes and empty orchards and pursed her lips. Junior's eyes had a hard edge, and I could see the tension in each careful step he took. He was still clutching a stone.

Gum Baby patted my head and pointed at the palace. "Move it, Bumbly. Stop lollygagging. Straight ahead to the giant floating building."

I sighed and started walking down the hill. Some things never changed. "Stop here."

The voice came from a shadowy hole next to a small pond. A waterfall spilled down from the palace high above, so smooth and uninterrupted it looked like a glass sculpture. A lily pad the size of a twin bed floated nearby, but I didn't see any flower canoes. We all looked around, awaiting further instructions.

“Get on,” the voice commanded.

“Get on what?” I asked.

“I think he means the lily pad,” said Ayanna. My

eyes widened. “We’re supposed to ride this?”

“How else are we gonna get to the palace?” Gum Baby shook her head, climbed down off my shoulder, and hopped onto the pad, jumping up and down and splashing the rest of us. “Gum Baby is *so* glad you’re not the brains of this operation. Good help is hard to find these days, otherwise Gum Baby would be looking for a new sidekick.”

Ayanna snickered and Junior snorted as they climbed aboard. I glared at them all as I carefully stepped onto the lily pad. Much to my surprise, it was rigid and pretty stable. “I am definitely *not* your sidekick. Ever.”

She sniffed. “Not with that attitude. Gum Baby’s gonna demote you to minion soon.”

“I—”

But before I could tell her how I really felt, the lily pad moved, with a lurch that sent me stumbling to the waxy floor. It began to rise in the air like an elevator, ferrying us *up* a waterfall to the palace in the sky.

“Sweet peaches,” I mumbled, flattening myself and staring into the sky as a fine mist sprinkled over us.

“Same old Tristan,” Ayanna said. “Hey, would you stop that!” she shouted to Gum Baby, who was dangling off the side and kicking her feet into the waterfall. I swallowed a nervous lump and counted to fifty. But, for all my discomfort, the ride was relatively smooth.

We came to a stop in front of an arched entrance to the palace. It was flanked by small ornamental trees growing out of crystal-clear pools, and birds trilled in the branches. Tiny silver, ruby, and sapphire fish with neon fins circled us, darting through the air so fast they looked like a rainbow.

“Get off,” came the disembodied voice. I looked around, confused. A shadow was flitting away in the distance. Was that our captor? Was the mysterious goddess waiting for us inside the palace? We were going to have to proceed cautiously and take our first opportunity to escape. Nana was waiting for me, and our getting thrown into an emerald dungeon wouldn’t help anyone.

But of course Gum Baby was the opposite of cautious. “Hurry up! Gum Baby hates suspense,” she called as she scuttled into the emerald-green palace.

“Hey!” I shouted. Ayanna and Junior took off after her, leaving me alone. I muttered something I shouldn’t have and ran to catch up. I slipped in between the trees, their flowers giving off a minty smell, and plunged through the two green pillars at the entrance.

“No. Way,” I whispered, skidding to a stop.

Inside was a giant open-air atrium filled with miniature fruit trees growing on pedestals, marble-lined ponds filled with fish so colorful I thought they were flower petals at first, and in the middle of it all, a deep pool so blue I mistook it for a painting. A throne floated on top—a living ornamental tree whose branches had been woven into a chair shape and covered in wildflowers of all different colors.

And at the foot of the chair, surrounded by colored pencils and scattered papers covered with drawings, sat a tiny bunny so familiar I thought my face would crack from smiling. She looked up as we all approached and let out a squeak of happiness.

“Tristan!”

“Chestnutt!” I said with a laugh, and scooped her into my arms. “What are you doing here?”

We all sat around a small pond filled with more of the tiny fish that Chestnutt called cichlids. These particular ones appeared to be neon purple with bright-blue fins. Every so often they leaped out of the water, dazzling us with aerial displays. It would’ve been amazing if Gum Baby hadn’t been trying to hit them with sap balls.

Some people, I swear.

“It’s so good to see you,” Chestnutt said. “But you shouldn’t have come. It’s dangerous here these days, what with the Shamble Man’s random attacks and that giant vulture trying to eat everybody. How did you get here? Did Anansi bring you?” The tiny brown-and-white bunny nibbled a piece of fruit from one of the many trees, and I had one of my own, a horned melon called a kiwano that tasted like a cross between a cucumber and a kiwi.

I popped another piece in my mouth, chewed and swallowed, then leaned forward. “No, Annie did. Keelboat Annie.”

Chestnutt grinned. “Of course she did. Where is she?”

I shook my head, wincing. “We got separated.” I ran down everything that had happened since the fight with Reggie. Had that only been yesterday

afternoon? It felt like years ago. I hesitated when I got to the part about John Henry. I could feel Junior's stare burning a hole in the side of my face, but once again I skipped the fact that the folk hero was slowly fading.

The bunny shuddered. "Everything is falling apart," she muttered.

"What do you mean?" Ayanna asked.

Chestnutt hopped to her pile of sketches and rummaged around, finally pulling out three and dragging them in front of us. "You see this?" she asked, tapping the first picture. It was a giant storm cloud, gray and black with bolts of green lightning streaking through it.

"Yeah, that's the storm outside, right?" I stared at it. "I forgot how good your sketches are." The way Chestnutt had drawn it so close to the ground and with sharp lines, it looked ominous. Deadly, even.

"Thanks! But that storm has been hovering over the same spot for weeks now," Chestnutt said, her voice growing grim. "And it's growing larger. That alone is worrisome, but when you add these next two things to the mix…"

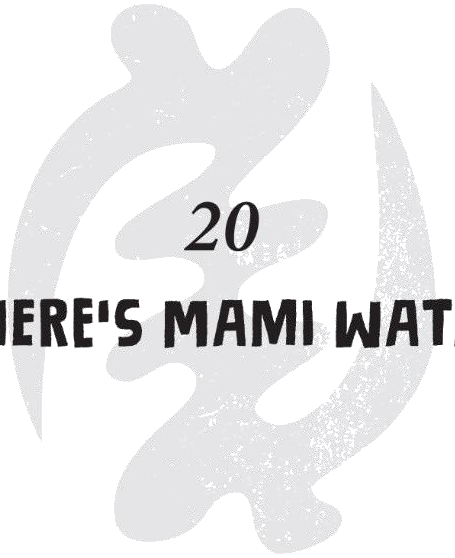
She pulled the second and third pictures forward. One was of a face I knew all too well—the masked figure of the Shamble Man. Red eyes that glowed like coals stared out from the paper, and I could feel the hatred in his gaze. I quickly moved on to the next portrait and paused. The person in it seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place her.

It was a beautiful brown woman, her hair braided into a single twist that curled down her back. Her eyes were like opals and her skin seemed to shimmer. I leaned closer. She almost looked like the spirit girl from the barn, Ninah.

*He's taken my mother.*

With Ninah's words echoing in my ears, I sat up straight. "Is this…?"

"You're looking at Mami Wata, the goddess of Nyanza, the source of the City of Lakes," said Chestnutt. "And, as of two days ago, missing."



# 20
# WHERE'S MAMI WATA?

***MISSING.***

All the lakes and waterfalls in the palace froze for a fraction of a second as that word echoed around the palace, a pause so brief I thought I was imagining it until I saw Junior scanning the area as well. Our eyes met, and for once he didn't glare at me. I guess we were both worried.

I leaned closer to Chestnutt, recalling Ninah's words. "Was she… taken?"

The little bunny nodded. "We think so. That's why I'm here. I'm on a mission for the Warren. They wanted someone here to investigate Wata's disappearance."

I didn't need a network of cute and fuzzy spies to figure out what had happened. "It was the Shamble Man, wasn't it?"

She nodded again. "Most likely. And it couldn't have happened at a worse time."

"What do you mean?" Junior asked.

Her ears drooped. "There was supposed to be a big summit. All the gods were supposed to attend. From the Sands, the Horn, the Grasslands, and MidPass. Nyame was planning on hosting it in the Golden Crescent. 'The Future of Alke,' he called it. But then Mami Wata disappeared and that giant vulture showed up. I was sent here to find clues about where the goddess could be."

"And?" I asked. "Did you find any?"

“Yup, yup!” Then Chestnutt hesitated. “Well, a few. But I need to confirm them.”

I shook my head and a wry smile crossed my face. “Look at you. Keeping secrets. You’re a regular spymaster. Brer Rabbit would be proud. The *real* Brer Rabbit, not the impostor in the SBP.”

She wrinkled her nose. “SBP?”

Gum Baby, still trying to hurl sap balls at the leaping fish, missed and stomped her foot. “Story Box Phone. Bumbletongue’s trying to be less bumbly, so he’s making up words now.”

I ignored her. “Chestnutt, that monster—the Shamble Man—he has my grandmother. He came to my world! Stomping around and destroying my grandparents’ house. And he took her. I have to find him. I *have* to save her.”

A giant sigh that felt way too big for such a tiny bunny escaped from between her whiskers. “I haven’t pinpointed his exact location yet. I’ve been trying for days.”

I sat back, frustrated. The others remained silent, Ayanna staring at her staff and Junior tossing a few stones in the air. Too many pieces of the puzzle were still missing. Why kidnap Mami Wata? What could the goddess have that the Shamble Man needed? Why take Nana? Trying to come up with answers felt like trying to grab greasy ice with my toes. *Im-poss-i-ble.*

I blew out a puff of air. “If only I’d listened to Ninah when she first tried to warn me. Instead, I acted like a blockhead.”

Chestnutt sat up straight. “Wait, you saw Ninah? Everyone thought she’d gone missing along with Mami Wata, since she was one of her favorite daughters. Where is she? If anyone can fill the lakes again until Mami Wata gets back, it’s her.”

I winced. “I don’t know where she went. Everything got confusing after the Shamble Man arrived. And why aren’t the lakes working? It’s so dry out there.”

“More like City of Fakes,” Gum Baby said. She flipped a sap ball and it knocked down a fish. “Got it! Wait. Oh no, fishy! What did Gum Baby do?”

Chesnutt hopped around in agitation. “It has something to do with Mami Wata and her power. Do you know her story? Maybe if I heard it, or saw it, we could figure out what to do next.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot as Ayanna and Junior looked expectantly at me. I mumbled a response. “I…can’t remember any stories. It’s Nana. I

don't know, ever since she was taken, whenever I try to think of one of her tales, I get…I just can't do it. I know I have to try and work through it…."

"And have you tried?"

I glanced at Ayanna. "No."

Silence filled the space, broken only by Gum Baby's sobs as she cradled the fish she'd knocked out of the water. After a moment, Chestnutt brightened and hopped in a circle, thinking hard. "Wait. You have Anansi, right? He could probably tell you the story. It was his Story Box for a while. Why don't we ask him?"

I flinched, but before I could say anything, Junior beat me to it. "He can't. It's *broken.*" He crossed his arms over his chest and nodded at me. "Go ahead, then. Show her."

I had no choice. I pulled the broken SBP out of my pocket and laid it in front of us. Chestnutt's ears drooped so low I thought she'd trip on them.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I think I broke it when I landed. Plus, it got wet and now it won't turn on."

Chestnutt studied it. "Did you put it in rice?"

Something hit me in the back of the head. "Ouch!" I said. My hands came away sticky, and I looked up to see Gum Baby pointing at me, her face covered in sappy tearstains.

"Th-that's what Gum Baby told that fool, but he didn't wanna l-l-listen. Big head and hardheaded, too. I should've hit *him* with the sap balls and not the f-f-fishyyyyyy!" She collapsed into wails, blowing snot sap everywhere as she sniffled.

I threw up my hands, stood, and stomped over to Gum Baby. I knocked the fish out of her hand and back into the water. After a few seconds the fish wriggled, then swam away. "There, see? It's fine. And enough about rice— it isn't going to fix a cracked phone!"

"Depends on what kind of rice you put it in. And…" Chestnutt's voice trailed off, and she froze. Then, she exploded into motion, diving into a pile of papers. Gum Baby and I watched her, confused, as the pile shook and then exploded. The bunny emerged, quivering with excitement, a rolled-up note in her mouth. I unfurled it.

"Look!" said Chestnutt. "Lady Night! She can help

you." "Who?" I asked.

"I've heard of her," Ayanna said slowly. "Bits and pieces. She's a boo hag, right?"

Chestnutt nodded. “Yup, yup! She can help you.” I froze. “A boo hag?”

“Yup, yup! She lives on the outskirts of the Golden Crescent, in the area the folks from MidPass moved into. According to the Warren’s notes, she fixes up magical items and even enchants a few of her own. If you can get her to repair the Story Box—I mean, the *SBP*—you and Anansi can use it to figure out where the Shamble Man has gone and rescue Mami Wata and your grandmother.”

“Wait, wait,” I said, holding up a hand. “How can the SBP do that?”

“Because the Story Box is attracted to stories. Do you have something of your grandmother’s?”

I started to say no, then paused and slapped my forehead. “I do! Nana’s quilt!”

“Great!” Chestnutt said. “The Story Box is drawn to that sort of thing. It can collect stories from objects like a wolf tracking a bunny.” She shivered a little at her own analogy. “So maybe you can track your grandmother that way. And if that doesn’t work, you could always get Anansi to tell you a story about the gods. Then the Story Box will be attracted to him like a magnet.”

I was getting lost. “Who’s ‘him’? Anansi? What are you talking about?”

“No…Never mind. It’s just a theory. The Warren doesn’t want me spreading rumors.”

“Please, Chestnutt, if you have information that can help, I want to know it. I have to find Nana. Who knows how she’s holding up. Please, tell me,” I begged.

Chestnutt’s ears drooped lower than I’d ever seen them go. She sank into a tiny furry ball, and her voice was a whispered squeak so faint I had to lean close to hear her. “I think the Shamble Man is a god of MidPass.”

# 21
# BOO HAG BLUES

**THE RAFT SOARED THROUGH SKY, HEADING WEST TOWARD THE** looming thunderclouds. We'd left immediately for Lady Night's home with one of Chestnutt's famous hand-drawn (paw-drawn?) maps, leaving the fuzzy little spy behind. She'd wanted to come with us but couldn't leave her post. The sun was low on the horizon, and the City of Lakes acted like a prism behind us, sending brilliant multicolored rays into the sky, a rainbow guide to Alke. It was a beautiful sight that would soon be gone forever if the water goddess wasn't found.

The storm lurked ahead, an ugly bruise threatening to roll over us all, a final finishing punch that would cap off a brutal round for Alke. Mami Wata gone. Nana gone. John Henry slowly disappearing from this world.

And the person responsible…was a god from MidPass?

I mean, I trusted Chestnutt, you get me? Anyone who didn't listen to her was a fool. And yet I understood why the Warren didn't want her spreading that information. If everyone started blaming MidPass for the current troubles, would they ever trust them again? Would they even allow the refugees from the burned-out island to stay?

A god from MidPass. Who could it be?

Images flashed in my mind, and I recoiled from each, refusing to believe that any of the gods I knew could've turned into such a monster. Could've unleashed plat-eyes and forced them to harass spirits and the living. Could be working with Kulture Vulture and his band of scavengers.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose?

Brer Rabbit?

High John?

Impossible. Right?

I shook my head and collapsed onto the raft. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I just had to find this Lady Night and see if she could fix the SBP. We could take things from there.

But one picture kept worming its way back into my brain, poisoning my thoughts and turning my stomach:

The Shamble Man holding John Henry's hammer. Where would he strike next?

"We're here!" Gum Baby shouted an hour or so later, her tiny voice barely carrying over the wind blowing around the raft. She struggled to hold the vessel steady, even with the step stool she'd made out of sap to anchor herself. The sun had just set, leaving Alke to deal with the gathering storm, and a new horror: the dark clouds now had a faint tinge of green around the edges.

I gripped Anansi's adinkra nervously, but it was cool to the touch. For now. Maybe I was just imagining things.

The raft shuddered. It felt like all of a sudden we began to drop, slowly at first, but then quickly picking up speed.

"Gum Baby?" I asked, my voice filled with uncertainty. The ground couldn't be that far away. A gleam flashed in the distance, then another. That had to be the palaces of the Golden Crescent in the distance. A dark smear rose to meet the stars to the northeast, a high wall that obscured the silvery clouds. Isihlangu, the mountain fortress.

That meant we were somewhere between the two regions of Alke. From the looks of it, I was about to learn exactly where very soon.

"Gum Baby!" Ayanna called out. She seemed a bit worried as well.

A group of hills rolled beneath us; on top of the highest one, a collection of lights twinkled around a sprawling ranch-style compound containing a large, flat building and several small log cabins. The faint sound of jazz music drifted up to my ears.

Sounded like we were about to crash Lady Night's party.

Literally!

"Gum Baaabyyy!" Junior screamed.

The raft landed, skidding down a grassy hill straight toward the wooden fence around the compound. I braced myself and squeezed my eyes shut.

*WHOMP!*

The impact threw us forward, and for the second time that day I found myself facedown with a sticky demon on my head. I groaned, unable to form words because the breath had been driven from my lungs.

Gum Baby scrambled off the raft and brushed grass from her clothes. “Gum Baby’s getting good at this pilot job. Landing in the dark with no gumming lights? Ten out of ten, thank you for flying Sap Attack Air, take all your Bumbletongues with you.”

“Sap Attack Air is a horrible—”

A ball of sap struck the side of my head and I shut my mouth, contenting myself with thinking of all the ways a diminutive folktale character could be disposed of discreetly.

Just then I realized the jazz had stopped. A door in the main building opened, and light spilled out of it. Before I could move, six or seven large men and women with axes and pitchforks surrounded us, suspicion in their eyes. As quick as oily lightning, Gum Baby slipped out of sight in a tall clump of grass, leaving me, Ayanna, and Junior to face the music. I glared after her, ready to let loose a few insults, when all of a sudden several sharp pointy objects were shoved into my face. I bit back what I was about to say and tried my best to look innocent as I righted myself and stood up slowly and carefully with my hands raised.

“Just a few kids,” one of the women muttered. “Maybe we should let them go.”

A couple of the others nodded, pulling back their makeshift weapons and letting the tension drain from their postures. That made me feel a little bit better, and I took one step forward.

“Hi,” I said. “We’re here to see—”

“WHO’S INTERRUPTING MY PARTY?” a ground-shaking voice bellowed into the night. To my surprise, the group of adults seemed to hesitate, looking at one another to see who would move first. Then a second shout rang out. “BRING THEM INSIDE SO I CAN USE THEIR BONES FOR CUP HOLDERS!”

That seemed to settle it. I watched in confusion as the men and women seemed to shrink into themselves. They looked old enough to hang out with my father and mother and do whatever grown-ups do for fun. (Harmonica practice? Macaroni portraits? Who knew?) Rough hands gripped my arms and marched me inside. A sign stretched across the lintel, reading HAPPY

BIRTHDAY, BIG BIG! in bold letters. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the bright lights inside, but when they did, I gasped.

We stood in a large hall that resembled my school cafeteria back in Chicago. But instead of the walls being covered in murals of the school mascot doing backflips, an odd array of items hung on display. A giant shield. An old banjo. Three sets of throwing knives that still looked sharp. An entire row of book covers. I mean, the place was really strange, you get me?

A group of people and one large boar (yes, I said a boar, as in a wild pig with tusks) were milling about on an elevated stage on the right side of the room holding musical instruments of all sorts. (Yes, even the boar, I'm not making this up.) More instruments stood next to them.

No.

Wait.

*Floated* next to them.

"Sweet peaches," I mumbled.

A dance floor occupied the middle of the room, and the walls were lined with tables and chairs. Partygoers sat around, or stood on the dance floor, or leaned against the walls. Men, women, children, and animals—I even saw a pair of giant oxen sitting near the back, wearing weird oversize sunglasses like they were trying to stay incognito. A nervous tension filled the space as everyone stared at us, and I gulped.

The crowd on the dance floor shifted, and from behind it stepped the widest man I'd ever seen. Not tall, just wide. His shoulders seemed to stretch from one side of the room to the other, and his legs could've been two barrels stuffed into a pair of pants. John Henry was the largest man I'd met to date, but whereas he was tall, this dude looked like two linebackers side by side in a trench coat.

He was also super ashy, like his skin had never seen a bottle of lotion, a jar of cocoa butter, or even a dab of old bacon grease.

He wore rough gray trousers, no shoes or socks (toes looking like ten dirty marshmallows), and a white T-shirt soaked with sweat. A curious garment hung around his neck—it looked like a black silk scarf at first, but when the man walked forward to stand in front of me, it seemed to shimmer and appeared milk-chocolate brown. And it fluttered. There was no breeze inside as far as I could tell, and my captors had shut the door on the way in.

I tried to get a closer look at it with Nyame's adinkra, but a strong hand gripped me.

"So what do we have here?" The man's hand encircled my injured wrist easily, preventing me from touching the sky god's charm and causing me to wince. He lifted my arm to examine my bracelet. "Well?" he asked one of my captors.

"Found them in a heap by the door, Big Big," a woman said. She sounded apologetic, and she looked at us sadly. "Like they'd been tossed from the sky."

The man—Big Big—continued to stare at the adinkra charms. Then he considered me thoughtfully. "Anybody else with them? Any adults?"

"Well, we didn't really check, but—"

"Then go check! There may be more of these freeloaders outside." Big Big spat on the floor in disgust and then, keeping an eye on my face, yanked the bracelet off my wrist before I knew what was happening.

"Hey, that's mine!"

"Hmm, that's not the way I see it," Big Big said with a conniving grin. He gestured to the walls with a sweep of his hand. "In case you couldn't tell, I'm a collector. Antiques. One-of-a kind items. Trinkets." He held up the bracelet and his grin widened as my eyes followed it. Then he motioned to Ayanna, who reluctantly handed over her staff. Junior clutched his satchel of stones like it was the most valuable thing on earth, but after Big Big scowled and formed a massive fist, the boy handed over the bag.

"But most importantly," Big Big continued, "I collect secrets. Rumors. Shifts in the tide of Alke's whims. So when a little birdie tells me there's a kid running around with the powers of the gods, maybe I listen. Maybe I figure, if I can get my hands on those powers, interested parties might pay me a fortune."

I struggled, but the man's hand was still tightly clamped around my wrist.

"COOKIE!" he shouted. "Where is that—? COOKIE! Where are you?"

There was movement in the crowd, and then a person draped from head to toe in a hooded cloak appeared next to us. Whoever it was, they were slightly smaller than me, and I briefly got a glimpse of red-rimmed eyes, though whether that was from crying or that was their natural color, I couldn't tell.

“About time,” Big Big said in annoyance. He shoved me toward the newcomer, and for a brief instant I thought about fighting back. I could have unleashed a combination that would’ve made Granddad proud.

A soft touch on my shoulder stopped me. It was the cloaked person. They gave me the tiniest of head shakes. *Not now*, it seemed to mean.

“Cookie, take these kids and lock ’em in the back. Then get one of your pots going—I’m starving again. And not that same rice dish you always make. Give me something different.”

The hooded figure shifted. “The rice dish is all we have, since you won’t allow the farmers to farm.”

Big Big reddened, gripping the scarf-like garment around his neck in frustration. “None of that sass, now, Cookie. Or do I need to…?”

The cloaked figure seemed to deflate. “No. I’ll…see what I can do.” “Better.”

I watched this exchange, baffled, and then checked the crowd. Everyone seemed nervous and on edge. Big Big realized this and waved his hands. “All right, enough! Get some music going. It’s my birthday! And I just got the best present of all.” He held up my bracelet—*my bracelet*—and laughed. I followed him with my eyes as he turned and headed back through the crowd to a table at the front edge of the dance floor. Burning rage collected in my stomach, bubbled, then spread through my limbs until it felt like my entire body would explode if I didn’t get that bracelet back.

The band started up again (that boar could play a mean saxophone), including the instruments floating in midair. Two drumsticks—with no one holding them—began to tap out a snazzy rhythm, and people started shuffling on the dance floor under Big Big’s watchful eye. Something weird was going on here, but I couldn’t see it while my adinkra bracelet was in that giant bully’s hands.

Someone tugged me gently. It was the cloaked person. With a slim gloved hand, they pulled me forward, and Ayanna and Junior followed as we skirted the edge of the crowd and headed toward a dark storage room in the back. People and animals alike stepped aside for us, inclining their heads as we walked by. I didn’t get it.

“Quickly,” the person called Cookie said in a low murmur. It sounded like a woman’s voice. “I’ll explain it all later.” She led us into the storage room and closed the door. I stood still, unable to see a thing in the dark. Something scraped on the floor. A spark winked not too far away, and then

another, and then a torch was lit. The flickering orange glow cast dancing shadows across Cookie's hooded cloak as she came closer. Beneath the hood, deep in the shadows, her red-rimmed eyes stared out at me.

"I need your help," Cookie said. "In exchange, I'll help you get the adinkras back."

Ayanna narrowed her eyes. "You know what they are?"

"I do. And yes, I will also get back your staff and your father's stones." This last bit she directed at Junior.

*His father's stones?*

But before I could puzzle that out, the cloaked person continued. "I know what you are, Tristan, and that you can help me. Please. We don't have much time. Big Big sent off a message. Any moment now the Shamble Man might show up through that door, and then we're all in trouble."

The Shamble Man! I hesitated, but I didn't see how I had a choice. There was no telling where Gum Baby had gone. Maybe she went to get help. More likely, she was lost. No, this looked like the only chance we had to escape the Shamble Man's clutches. I needed to approach him on my terms, not his.

"Fine," I said. "What do you want from us?"

I heard a deep inhale, and in a shaky voice, Cookie spoke.

"I want you to help me steal back my skin."

# 22
# JUKE JOINT JAMBOREE

**ONE TIME WHEN I WAS LITTLE, WHILE DAD WAS OFF TRAINING** with Granddad, Nana came up to our apartment in Chicago to help Mom and give her a little break. (Side note: Did you know adults take naps? I didn't at the time. And they do it willingly! Mind-blowing. Anyway…) I woke up screaming one night, terrified that something was coming to get me. Maybe through the window, maybe from under the bed…Wherever it was from, it wanted to take me away. Nana burst into my room to find me shivering in my blankets.

"A witch is gonna get me," I said, scanning every corner.

She calmed me down, then brought me to the kitchen to help her clean up from dinner. While I dried dishes, Nana started telling one of her stories. It was more a history lesson than a folktale. You know Nana, though. Every story she told felt like an award-winning production.

"Have I ever told you about the island folk?" she asked, handing me a plate. We were standing in front of the sink, she in her stocking feet and me barefoot on a step stool.

I shook my head solemnly.

"'Bout time you learned. Shame you don't get this in your school, but that's neither here nor there. I'm called to teach, and you about to learn. Dry this pot, baby." She cleared her throat, thought for a few seconds, then began.

"The island folk have different names, depending on who you ask. Gullah, Geechee. No matter what you use, do it with respect. But they keep

their own business. Rituals, language…they passed them down and kept their traditions local. Same thing with their stories. Well, one story I've heard told is about what they call boo hags. Creatures that slip their skin off at night. They creep into your home while you're asleep, sit on your chest, and suck the air from your lungs. You wake up tired and drained, as if sleeping had been a struggle. By then the boo hag is long gone, back in her lair, reunited with her skin. According to those stories, one way to defeat a boo hag is to take her skin before she can retrieve it—then you hold power over her. Some people went to conjure women—root witches—to get wards to keep boo hags away."

I'd stared at her in horror. "Witches? Aren't they evil?"

She didn't answer me right away. Finally she sighed and gave me a half smile.

"Yes and no, baby. Yes and no. See, there's some powerful folk out there. Powerful folk, with magic straight out of legend. And, just like everybody, you got your good ones and your bad ones. The thing is, some people don't like when others have power. Even if it's being used for good, they don't care. They've got to control it, to own it, and if they can't own it, they want to destroy it. They might call you a boo hag even if you're only helping people as a conjure witch. Especially when those people are writing the stories about you. At the end of the day, the only thing you can control is how the power you got is used."

Nana had paused while washing a pan and stared at me with a serious expression. "So, that nightmare you had? That creature coming for you ain't got no power over you. *You* got the power. Let 'em know you got a conjure witch looking out for you. I know a couple, matter fact."

"But how will I know if a witch is good or evil?"

She resumed her scrubbing. "You just gonna have to decide who to believe—the witch, or the one writing the witch's story."

Now I was facing a boo hag in person. I stared at Cookie in disbelief, positive I'd heard her wrong. "You want me to do what now?"

"You're her!" Ayanna said. "You're Lady Night."

The cloaked head rose defiantly, even though I couldn't see what was underneath. "I am. And I'm the rightful owner of this juke joint. I want you to help me steal my skin back from that giant lumbering oaf out there. Before he took over, this was a place of refuge. Of shelter. Somewhere the

tired and weary and downtrodden could come and relax safely, in the company of others like them."

"Juke joint…" Junior said thoughtfully. "My father used to say they were oases for our people."

Lady Night cocked her head, like she wanted to ask a question. From beneath her hood, her glowing eyes stared at Junior, then she nodded as if realizing something. "Indeed. Well, in exchange for your aid, I will help you get your items of power back. The bracelet, the staff…and those peculiar stones."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. She knew something about Junior, and again, that niggling feeling that I was missing something tickled my mind. But I didn't have time to think about that. This was the wildest bargain I'd ever heard of. What were you supposed to say to a deal like that? *Okay, I'll get you some skin.* Like I was running to the corner store for a bag of Doritos. Skin wasn't supposed to be misplaced like keys. But then again, the fact that she'd lost it gave me an advantage….

"As it turns out, I need your help, too," I said.

"With the bracelet? Yes, I—"

"No. I mean, yes, with that, but also with something else. I broke it by accident when I came here, and without it I won't be able to find my grandmother. Chest—uh, a friend told me you can fix magical items. Like, even badly damaged things. Can you?" I hated how desperate I sounded, but…well, I was desperate. Slowly I pulled out the SBP from my shorts pocket. It took every ounce of effort I could spare to part with it, but I didn't have a choice. I needed it fixed, and fast.

Lady Night took it from me and studied it. "Is this what I think it is?" I nodded.

"Did you put it in rice?"

I bit my lip and tried not to scream. She noticed, and her shoulders shook. It took me a second to realize she was laughing.

"Easy, Anansesem," she said. "I'll tell you what. I will fix your phone for you—"

I started to grin.

"—after you get my skin back."

The grin froze on my face. She shrugged. "If you don't, I can't help you. Literally. Without my skin I'm powerless. It's why that giant thief out

there keeps it on his person at all times. When I get it back I'm gonna make him sorry he ever set foot in my joint."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to think of a plan. Something that would trick Big Big into taking off Lady Night's skin for a fraction of a second. From the way he clutched it, and the way everyone in the place jumped to do what he said, he didn't seem like someone who would listen to reason. We would have to be clever. This wasn't the time for wild heroics and fisticuffs. We needed to—

*WHAM!*

A thundering crash shook the walls, and my head jerked up in surprise. The sound had come from the main room. Had Big Big tripped and fallen or something? Lady Night and I glanced at each other when a loud, squeaky, familiar voice cut through the chaos.

"HEY, BUG BUG! GUM BABY'S FISTS GOT SOME QUESTIONS YOUR FACE NEEDS TO ANSWER!"

"Oh no," I whispered, my hands covering my face.

Lady Night slipped past me and opened the door a crack. "What is it? Who's that? Do you know them? It sounds like your reinforcements have arrived."

"No," Junior answered for me, trying to see through the opening. "She's just loud."

We all peeked out. And…look, everybody has that one person in their life who gets labeled "extra." You know what I mean. They're extra loud, extra energetic, and their whole personality revolves around doing everything just a bit too much. That was Gum Baby.

"Oh no," Ayanna said. "I *just* cleaned it."

Lady Night's eyes—the only part of her that was visible—were wide in astonishment.

Junior was actually laughing. At a time like this!

And me? I just sighed.

Gum Baby, the tiny terror, had rammed through the juke joint's entrance while *riding Ayanna's raft* and was zipping around the room like she was surfing in a whirlpool. A scrap of dirty white cloth was tied around the lower half of her face so all we could see were her eyes and her angry eyebrows. She was pointing at Big Big as she circled the room. Band members, floating instruments, and people in the audience dove to the floor

as she dipped toward them. The boar let out a cry of surprise and flung himself flat to avoid getting clipped by the raft.

"Enough!" shouted Big Big. He slammed a hand on his table and stood up, the chair shooting backward. He shoved the furniture out of his way and stomped to the middle of the dance floor, one hand clutching Lady Night's skin. He'd taken it from around his neck and tied it around his fist, the way Granddad would wrap my knuckles before boxing practice. "Who do you think you are, interrupting my party? Do you know who I am? I've picked crumbs out of my teeth bigger than you!"

"Sounds like you need to brush better!" Gum Baby called down. Her arm moved in a blur and a small sap ball bounced off of Big Big's head. "Does poor little Bug Bug need help flossing, too?"

"It's *Big Big*!" the man shouted. He jumped and tried to swat her out of the air, but Gum Baby swerved aside and laughed.

"Too slow, Bugaboo. What's the matter?"

Big Big growled something I can't repeat and swiped at her again. He tried to run after her, but Gum Baby stayed just out of reach, sitting down on the raft and dangling her legs off the edge. She kicked them back and forth, looking like she didn't have a care in the world. She lazily tossed sap balls at her pursuer like she was skipping stones on a warm summer day, all the while keeping up a steady stream of insults:

"Sap attack! Wow, it's like your big ole head just leaped in the way." "Are you trying to show your friends how *not* to act?"

"Sap attack. Two sap attacks. Gum Baby can do this forever, you know. Let Gum Baby know if you need to take a break for a snack. You want a sappy cup, Boom Boom?"

Beside me, Lady Night started to go through the door, but I raised a hand to stop her. "Wait…I think I know what she's doing. And, I can't believe I'm saying this, but it's actually working."

"What, making him mad?" Lady Night asked.

"Actually…yes. Trust me, she's reeeally good at that."

As if she'd heard me, Gum Baby tossed one more sap ball before collapsing dramatically to the floor of the raft, her hands behind her head. "Gum Baby is booored. Thought there would be more action than this. Gum Baby should've brought her knitting along. At least that way she could've made a little blanket for Bobo."

Big Big's face was turning an odd shade of purple and his mouth was wrinkling into a twisted frown. I knew that expression—I made the same one every second I spent around the little loudmouth. I pulled the door open a little bit wider and whispered, "Get ready. When the time comes, grab your skin."

"The time?" Lady Night asked in alarm. "What time? What are you about to do?"

Ayanna sat down on the floor and motioned for Junior to do the same. "Might as well take a seat and watch. He's gonna go be a hero. He acts like he hates her, but Tristan and Gum Baby make a really good team."

I made a horrified expression. "Us? A team? Please don't speak that into existence."

Just then, Big Big let out a violent scream and leaped into the air, grabbing the raft with both hands. "MY. NAME. IS. BIG BIG!!!" The raft actually dragged him forward a few paces before he dug in his heels and slowly pulled the magical vessel down to the floor. Gum Baby had jumped to the other end and was flinging sap ball after sap ball at the giant's bald head—so much that it looked like he was growing a sticky afro.

"Be ready," I whispered urgently to Lady Night, then yanked the door open and dashed out.

No one was paying me any attention. They were too focused on the battle between the pint-size pirate and the troll. So when I scampered up onto the stage, got a running head start, and sprang through the air onto Big Big's back, everybody was surprised. I mean, *I* was surprised. I recovered quickly, though, and patted the man's new sticky hair.

"Nice look on you, Butt Butt," I said, before yanking the boo hag's skin off his hand and flinging it into the crowd. "Lady Night—now!"

Big Big's eyes grew wide and he let go of the raft so fast it shot forward. Gum Baby yelped as she skidded across the dance floor and into the back room I'd just left. Big Big turned, grasping for his neck, but the skin was gone. "No!" he shouted. "Nooo!" His hands found my arm and he yanked me over his shoulder and then threw me down on the dance floor.

*"Oomph."* The air left my lungs again for the second time that night, and before I could recover, Big Big's massive hands dragged me upright to face him. A look of unbridled fury turned his features into those of a jungle cat.

“You!” he snarled. “I should’ve disposed of you when I first saw you. The Shamble Man ain’t gonna get a chance to bury you, because I’m gonna dig a hole for you so deep no one will ever find your bones. You hear me? I —”

“Clifford!” a sharp voice called out from across the room.

Big Big flinched. He turned, still gripping me by the collar, and my eyes grew wide.

Lady Night stood alone on the stage, still cloaked, her skin in her hands.

No. *On* her hands. The glimmering garment seemed to pour itself like honey, slowly slipping up her arms and into her cloak. Her stance grew straighter, and she gripped the edges of her hood and pulled it back.

A beautiful woman with skin dark like twilight and eyes glittering like diamonds stood in front of us. Her hair was twisted into a curly faux-hawk that sat atop her head like a crown, and the cloak fell away to reveal a long dress that shimmered like moonlight on ink, and silver heels that threatened to pull you inside if you stared at them for too long.

Lady Night’s gaze swept around the room before her eyes returned to pin Big Big in place. She stepped deliberately, emphatically, to the edge of the stage, and a few people in the crowd rushed to offer their hand to help her down. She accepted one regally, and then walked across the floor to where Big Big and I stood. Movement rippled in the corner of my eye and I craned my neck to see Gum Baby trotting across the floor. To my surprise, she climbed up to Lady Night’s shoulder and sat there as if she were the queen’s right hand. Lady Night spared her a warm smile before turning back to Big Big.

“Clifford, let him go.” Her tone was low but intimidating. Big Big gulped, then lowered me to the floor, unclenching his sausage-like fingers from my collar and patting my shoulders gently.

“There, I didn’t mean no harm, right, kid? Just foolin’ with you.” I glared at him and shook my head. “Clifford?” He flinched. “S’why I go by Big Big.”

“You think that’s better? Honestly, I’m disappointed in you.” “Yes,” Lady Night said, though her words held more of an implied threat. “We all are.”

Big Big—I mean Clifford—swallowed nervously and took a couple steps back. Two giant steps back. Honestly, seeing the expression on Lady

Night's face, I was tempted to step back, too, but I didn't want to call attention to myself.

But of course Gum Baby was nodding her head and cosigning everything. "Nah, don't back up now, Bing Bong, you done messed up. You know you done messed up, right? Yeah, you do."

Big Big raised both hands in a pleading gesture, his rumbling voice suddenly very nervous. "Look, ma'am, I wasn't gonna keep your skin forever. I was gonna give it back, honest. I was just tired of you bossing me around."

"I gave you a *job*!" Lady Night's voice cracked like a whip. "When your home burned on MidPass, I took you in and sheltered you. Fed you. And you didn't like taking orders from me, so as soon as that masked Shamble Man dangled his offer, you betrayed me?"

"I was only—"

"Enough!" Lady Night looked at me, then back at Big Big. "Give them back what you stole."

He hesitated, then when her eyes narrowed, slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the adinkra bracelet. Reluctantly, he tossed it to me. Ayanna and Junior came out of the back to reclaim the staff and satchel of stones. I slipped on the bracelet and briefly contemplated using the akofena charm to go upside his head. I didn't, though. One, my right wrist still throbbed, and two, Lady Night had everything well in hand.

"Now, then," she said. "What is an appropriate punishment for a thief and a bully?" She tapped a long, manicured nail with black fingernail polish against her chin. "How should I teach you a lesson?"

Gum Baby, juggling sap balls now, chimed in. "Maybe take his skin?" "I don't think it works like that," I said with a grimace.

"Who asked you, Bumbletongue?"

Lady Night let a ghost of a smile cross her lips. "I cannot take his skin, little one, but I can make him uncomfortable in his own." She flicked her fingers down toward the floor and her cloak zipped into her hands. She held it to her face and whispered into it, letting her words fill the garment with power.

I couldn't resist—I had to see the magic. I grasped Nyame's charm and closed my eyes. When I opened them, I inhaled sharply. Fragments of a fable swirled around the cloak, stretching it sideways and elongating the hood. Lady Night tossed it into the air, and like a magnet it flew straight to

Big Big, swallowing him whole. His muffled shouts filled the air, but the enchanted cloth swaddled him like an infant, entangling his arms and legs and sending him crashing to the floor. He wriggled and writhed for a few more seconds, then grew still.

I blinked, letting the magic fade from my eyes. “Is he…?” I couldn’t finish.

“No,” Lady Night said with a chuckle. “Just…wearing a more appropriate skin, since he wanted one that wasn’t his own.”

Gum Baby dropped to the floor and kicked the cloak aside, revealing a large wrinkly-skinned weasel. She squealed in delight and hopped on top of it, then pointed toward the door. “Giddyup, Bam Bam, awaaaaaay!”

Big Big the weasel took a step, then paused before taking another. He inched forward like that, slowly and cautiously. Gum Baby kept her hand raised. Another step. A frown crossed her face. “Is this the fastest you can go? Gum Baby has seen hair grow faster than this. Gum Baby wants a refund.”

The people and animals in the juke joint cheered and crowded around Lady Night. She acknowledged them all, expert hostess that she was. Everyone got a smile, and she knew everyone’s name. The band hopped back onstage and the boar (“Benny the Boar,” he said by way of introduction) led them in a snappy little melody with a drum pattern that had my head nodding. Someone passed around cups of chilled mint tea, and in the back, cooking pots started bubbling.

“Where did all this come from?” I said in amazement.

Lady Night laughed and linked my arm with hers. “I’m a witch, remember? Now come, let’s see if we can find a pot of rice for your phone.”

# 23
# JOLLOF RICE

**ENCHANTED DRUMS BEAT A SLOW RHYTHM AS WE MOVED TO THE** back of the juke joint.

There was a booth in the corner, a C-shaped seat curved around a heavily stained and scratched table. In the middle of the surface was a large black cook pot resting on top of three silver stones the size of grapefruits. I stared at the pot suspiciously. It looked mighty close to something I'd call a cauldron.

Lady Night slid into the booth with a sigh and motioned for us to join her. Ayanna, Junior, and I squeezed into the other side, the three of us nervously huddled together.

The older woman chuckled softly. "Relax, children. Be like your friend. She seems at ease." She pointed to the middle of the club, where Gum Baby had stayed with the crowd, shouting and dancing and leaving sticky little footprints all over the floor.

"So," Lady Night said, turning to me, "I believe I promised to fix your magical phone."

I pulled out the SBP and, glancing around to make sure no one else was watching, slid it over to her.

Ayanna shook her head sadly.

Junior leaned forward. "It *can* be fixed, right?"

I rolled my eyes. "C'mon, man, give it a rest."

"I'm just making sure. *Some* of us actually care about the things we're put in charge of."

“Listen,” I said, turning to him, “you’ve got one more time to—”

“Children!” Ayanna said loudly. She looked at Lady Night and made a face. “Excuse them. Please continue.”

The woman eyed the three of us, picked up the SBP, and sighed. “Such a little thing. And yet…the power it holds. If I fix this, young man, you have to promise to be more careful with it.”

My face grew red at her stern tone, and I tried to ignore Junior’s smug look. “I will,” I mumbled.

“Good. Because if this fell into the wrong hands, we’d all be in mortal trouble. You know that, right? With this, someone could do inconceivable damage and hurt a lot of people.”

“Someone. You mean the Shamble Man?”

“I don’t know what his ultimate goal is, but theoretically, yes.”

I fiddled with my thumbs as I thought about that, and the question I wanted to ask next. At last I took a deep breath and blurted it out. “The same person—well, bunny—who told me to come find you also suspects the Shamble Man is from MidPass. A god. Is that true? That can’t be true, right?”

Lady Night didn’t answer. She drummed her fingers on the tabletop and surveyed the crowd. Gum Baby had clambered onto the stage and was now banging on a pair of drums, and surprisingly, not doing too bad a job. The crowd loved her, but I wasn’t sure how the enchanted sticks felt about getting all gummed up.

“I think,” Lady Night began, “that I don’t want to jump to any conclusions. We all saw what happened with Anansi and Brer Rabbit.”

I nodded. The division between MidPass and the rest of Alke had been so distracting that the trickster god was able to impersonate Brer Rabbit without anyone noticing until it was almost too late.

And yet, I saw a fleeting expression on her face. That little hesitation adults have when they don’t want to lie. She hadn’t answered the question because she wasn’t sure, either.

And that scared me.

“Speaking of Anansi…” She picked up the phone and tossed it into the pot.

We all gawked at her.

“What are you—?” I began.

“Hey!” Junior said, partially standing.

“Relax,” Lady Night said. “I’m just putting it in rice.”

My jaw dropped to the tabletop, and then I stood and peeked into the pot. Sure enough, the SBP rested on top of a pile of rice. But it wasn’t the white rice I’d expected. It was slightly orange in color, with peas and chopped up carrots mixed in. Bits of red pepper had been shaken on top, and the dish smelled spicy.

“What sort of rice is this?” I asked, worried about it doing even more damage. When they said *Put your phone in rice*, this wasn’t what I’d had in mind.

Lady Night frowned. “Jollof rice, of course. Jollof fixes everything.”

“Of course,” I mumbled, slightly—no, incredibly flabbergasted. I watched as she touched all three of the heating stones, whispering under her breath as she’d done earlier with her cloak. The stones started to glow, and wisps of steam curled out of the pot. The aroma that began to fill the air made my mouth water and my heart swell. It smelled like…well, it smelled like comfort. Like Sunday dinner, or a new book, or fresh rain on a spring morning. It was hard to explain, and yet when I looked around the table, Ayanna and Junior looked just as surprised.

“What do you smell?” I asked them.

Ayanna smiled dreamily. “A fresh crisp breeze as I’m soaring through the air.”

Junior kept his eyes glued on the phone and didn’t answer right away. Finally, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Plantains,” he said softly. “Fried to a slight crisp and cooling on the windowsill.”

After a second, I spoke up. “A new book, when you first open it and the pages are stiff.”

Lady Night nodded. “It is the smell of the stories that call to you, and the times in which you heard them. But it appears I will need your help, young Anansesem. This…Story Box is active, but just barely, and it isn’t responding to me fully. There is a trace of power rippling through it, but it will not return to form without you, for some reason.”

When I looked away from her and into the pot, the crack across the screen had disappeared. The power was still off, however, and I bit my lip, worry gathering in my stomach. How was I supposed to help? Fingerprint unlocking? Eye scan? A secret password? Oh man, I hoped it wasn’t a password. I only had one that I used for everything (I know, I know, but it’s

a good one, trust me) and there was no way I was saying that out loud. Nuh-uh. Not happening.

Gum Baby had finally finished her drum solo and skipped over to our booth. Just in time to hear Lady Night lean over and say, "You're an Anansesem. So…"

"So it needs a story," I finished. I looked around the room, unsure. It made sense. I'd been neglecting the Story Box, what with everything that had been going on. I hadn't been collecting stories like I was supposed to. I had to face it—I was a failure as an Anansesem.

Lady Night nodded. "It will need a *lot* of stories, powerful ones. But there is a risk to this. He who has your grandmother wears armor made out of iron monsters. The same creatures who were—"

"Attracted to stories," I finished grimly. Great. I needed Anansi and the SBP to find Nana, but fixing it might draw the attention of the Shamble Man. Of course there was the chance he might bring Nana with him, but I couldn't count on that. What if I couldn't think of a powerful story to tell? And if I tried and failed yet again, what would everybody say? They might not think I was even worthy of carrying the title of Anansesem and wielding the SBP…. Maybe Junior was right.

Lady Night saw the look of despair on my face, but before she could say anything, Gum Baby hopped onto the table and took a whiff of the pot's contents. "Hoo-whee!" she said. "Whatever is cooking in there, Gum Baby wants a plate. Smells like it'll clear the Simon Says."

"The what?" Lady Night asked with a frown.

"The Simon Says."

Ayanna cleared her throat. "*Sinuses*, Gum Baby. It'll clear your sinuses."

"If you even have any," I added.

Gum Baby shot me an evil look as she snuck her hand into the pot, only to pause, then peer closer inside. "Ew, Bumbletongue, is this your phone? You put your phone in the food? That's just…Is Gum Baby the only one around here with any home training?" She stomped across the table to stand in front of me, one hand on her hip and the other pointing at the pot. "Gum Baby tries and tries to teach you some manners, and they just go in one ear and out the other. Gum Baby's gonna talk to your grandmother when we find her. What would your nana say?"

I rolled my eyes, then froze.

Nana.

"That's it," I whispered. "What would Nana say?"

"What? Speak up, boy."

"Gum Baby, you're a genius."

The little loudmouth sniffed. "About time you recognized."

I looked at Lady Night, excitement replacing my previous despair. "I know how to power the Story Box. I don't always have to be the one to tell the story. Nana, my grandmother, she told me that. I just have to be the one to *listen.*"

A confused look crossed her face, but I squeezed past a baffled Junior, grinned at Ayanna, and slid out of the booth. "Lady Night, would it be okay if I moved the pot and stones to the stage?"

"I suppose…" she said. "Let me cool them down so you don't burn yourself." She blew once on the outside of the pot. "There, that should do it."

I poked the pot with one tentative finger. Cool to the touch. "Thank you." I put on the lid, grabbed the pot. "Gum Baby," I called back over my shoulder, "grab the stones and meet me on the stage."

"Why?"

"We're gonna crowdsource a story."

While I carried the pot, Gum Baby sat on my shoe, juggling the cooking stones and calling out directions.

"A little to the left!"

"No, your *other* left!"

"Watch out for that—"

I stubbed my toe against the bottom edge of the stage and toppled forward. I managed to keep the jollof rice from spilling out, but I banged my knee and collapsed into a heap. Gum Baby executed a perfect somersault and landed in the center of the stage, bowing to a smattering of applause from the crowd.

I glared at her as I picked up the cook pot and sat it on the stones, which Lady Night had set to glowing again from the back of the room. "Some guide you are."

"It ain't Gum Baby's fault you're clumsy," she said.

You know that look grown-ups give you when you just did something wrong and they're ready to unleash a blistering lecture that would strip

paint from the walls, but they can't because they're in public? That's the look I turned on Gum Baby. People were starting to gather around the stage, so I gritted my teeth and gave her my best *You're gonna get it later* glare, which she ignored. I turned to watch everyone approach and got a good gander at the juke joint's patrons.

They were a mix of folk. Farmers in boots caked with mud and couples in fine outfits and expensive jewelry. The boar who'd led the band cradled his saxophone in one hand and smoothed down the bristles atop his head with the other. A trio of badgers the size of golden retrievers huddled close together near the edge of the crowd. The strange pair of oxen from before, still wearing the weird sunglasses. And still more Alkeans flooded through the door, filling the room to capacity and then some.

There was a pocket of space surrounding an empty table on the edge of the dance floor, and on a hunch I held the Amagqirha's bead from Isihlangu.

Sure enough, the table I'd thought was empty actually seated five or six spirits. Their golden eyes were turned to me, curious and expectant.

Lady Night had said that before Big Big took over, the juke joint was a place of refuge, a place to forget troubles, if only for a couple of hours. Entertainment and stories and good times were had. I guess word of Big Big's downfall had spread quickly throughout the area.

*And now they're all looking at me,* I thought. *No pressure.*

I clapped my hands once, twice, three times. "Alkeans," I said loudly. "People. Animals. Spirits. My name is Tristan Strong."

"I know you," someone said. The boar. He pointed at me with the saxophone. "You're that storyteller. The one who battled them iron monsters."

The crowd murmured and I nodded. "Yes. That's me."

"You gonna tell a story? One of them magic ones?" Everyone seemed to lean forward at the question, and I swallowed a lump in my throat and shook my head. I wasn't even going to attempt it.

"No. Not today." The disappointment was audible as everyone in the room seemed to deflate. "Today, I need *your* stories."

Silence.

"Alke's in trouble," I said. I forced my voice to project to the far corners of the room. "There's a menace stalking the land, taking our joy and leaving behind fear."

"There's always a menace!" someone else shouted.

“That’s true. There will always be some new evil on the horizon looking to sneak into our lives when we aren’t looking and take what isn’t theirs. We will have to be on guard constantly.”

Lady Night moved through the crowd, slipping between her patrons with ease, until she stood just to the left of me, off the stage. She nodded at me to continue, Big Big the weasel now in her arms like a rich person’s Chihuahua. Ayanna and Junior joined her. Having friendly faces to focus on when I got nervous helped. I took a deep breath and spread my arms wide.

“I…need your help.” Saying those four words felt like pulling nails from my heart, but it got easier after that. “Someone—the Shamble Man— took something from me.” When I spoke the villain’s name, the murmuring crowd fell silent. “Not something, but *someone*. Someone special. And I’m going to get her back.”

I paused, then spoke those words again, slowly. “I’m going to get her back. Whatever it takes. However long it takes. I know I’m asking a lot, and we risk drawing the attention of the Shamble Man. You don’t have to help me. But…I would appreciate it greatly if you did.”

I stopped speaking abruptly. It was like my words had just run out and all that was left were the indescribable emotions rattling around inside me. The crowd shuffled, and murmurs traveled throughout the room. For once Gum Baby didn’t have anything to say.

Because she was sleeping.

She was lying on her back on stage left, one arm thrown over her eyes and a sap bubble slowly inflating and deflating as she snored softly.

Some people, I swear.

Just when it felt like I was completely on my own and nobody was going to put their life on the line to help me, some movement caught my eye. A mother and daughter who’d been keeping to themselves in the back now made their way to the stage. The little girl couldn’t have been more than four. She wore a simple gray dress and black shoes with silver buckles. Her hair was braided into two pigtails, each with a white ribbon tied in a bow at the end.

Her mother, with tired eyes but a gentle smile, nodded at me. “How can we help?” she asked.

I smiled back gratefully and dropped into a squat. “I am an Anansesem. I tell stories, and I collect them to share with others. Right now, I need your stories.” Standing up, I looked around the room and raised my voice. “I

need stories about those people in your lives who helped you when no one else would or could. You know the ones I'm talking about. The people who, at a time in your life when you were struggling to keep your head above water, threw you a rope and pulled you to shore. Tell me about them, so I can find the person who helped me like that."

No one spoke for a moment, and then the little girl raised her hand. I smiled and pointed at her. "Yes? Who's your story about?"

She dropped her head shyly, fiddling with her hands as she spoke. "My grandfather. When my mommy was trapped inside the mean ship, he took care of me. When I cried or was afraid, he'd make silly shadow puppets by candlelight and tell me stories."

Her mother's hands held her close, and I met her eyes in shock. She'd been inside the Maafa, the slave ship that had sent forth the iron monsters. That experience, the trauma—it was something you never forgot.

I knew.

I nodded at the little girl. "Your grandfather is a wonderful man." That made her smile, and she hugged her mother, happy to have contributed.

"My sister," another man called from across the room. A farmer leaning against a wall. "When my home burned in the MidPass fire, she opened up hers to me and a few others until we got back on our feet."

Lady Night caught my eye and nodded at the cook pot. It was glowing. The stories were working!

"Anyone else?" I asked. "Who stepped up for you when no one else would?"

The badgers stood as one. "The raven who lived in the tree above our den! He helped us escape the fires."

"My aunt."

"My brother."

"Mami Wata from Nyanza."

More people began to call out the names of those who had left an impression on their lives.

Like my nana.

The juke joint was filled with laughter as people swapped stories about their heroes. At my feet, the cook pot began to pulse with a silver-blue glow. I crouched just as Gum Baby yawned and stretched.

"How'd we do?" she asked.

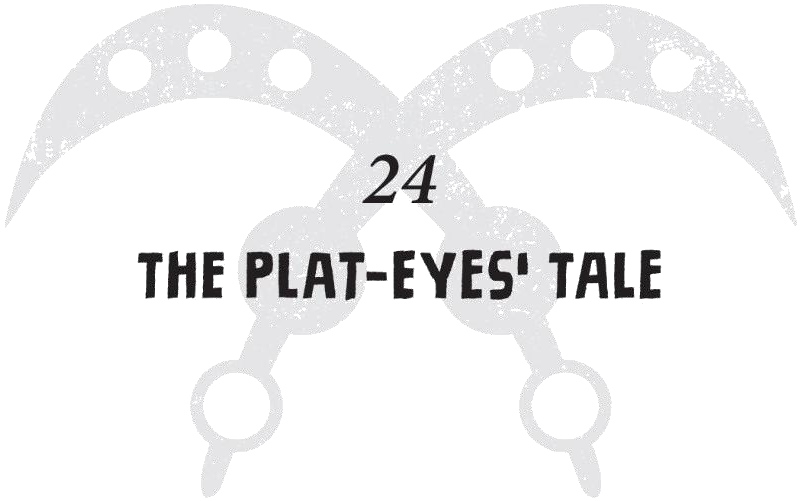
“*I* did okay.” I lifted the lid of the cook pot and was hit with steam and spices that made my eyes water and my stomach growl. But I hungered more for the sleek black-and-gold phone resting on top of that mound of savory jollof rice.

It blinked to life, and the splash screen appeared: a tiny spider crawling across the display. That disappeared, and the home screen I’d been used to seeing dissolved into view. And there, in the top corner, Anansi lay sleeping in his web hammock.

I’d never been happier to see someone I didn’t actually trust.

I wiped the phone clean with a handkerchief the boar handed me. (Yes, I know, just roll with it.) For the first time in a long while, I felt like I had my feet under me and I just might have a chance of finding the Shamble Man, rescuing Nana and Mami Wata, and returning to my world safely.

And that’s when the plat-eyes returned.



# 24
# THE PLAT-EYES' TALE

**I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF CELEBRATING.**

I stood on the stage holding the SBP, grinning down at Anansi as he slept through all the chaos and turmoil. I raised the lit-up phone, and the crowd cheered. Ayanna and Lady Night high-fived. Everyone smiled and continued to call out the people who helped them, and the mood in the juke joint was incredible.

Except for Junior. He stared at me with a baleful glare. What was up with him now?

Meanwhile, Gum Baby was running back and forth across the stage, encouraging the crowd to tell their stories. “What about you? Somebody helped you with that outfit, ’cause Gum Baby saw you last week, and you were a mess. Shout them out!”

Everyone laughed, and I got an idea. I tapped the Listen Chile icon, the app that recorded stories and translated them for me so I could retell them on my travels. A blinking red light appeared in the corner of the screen, severing one of the anchor strands of Anansi’s hammock and sending the trickster god tumbling to the bottom of the phone.

“Hey!” he shouted, but I ignored him and held the SBP’s camera steady as I videoed the crowd, watching in awe as the names being mentioned appeared as golden text bubbles above each speaker, before bursting into dazzling confetti that floated to the top of the screen and filled the battery meter.

“Their stories are charging the Story Box,” I said in wonder. Lady Night stepped up onto the stage next to me and peeked over my shoulder.

“Of course they are,” Anansi grumbled. He climbed to his feet and dusted off his pants. “I could’ve told you that if you had—Oh, excuse me.” His gaze fell on the boo hag and his manner switched completely. “Pardon me, ma’am, I don’t believe we’ve met. My name is—”

“Anansi,” she interrupted. “The Weaver. Trickster god. Spinner of tales and tangled lies. I know who you are.”

I fought back a grin as Anansi hemmed and hawed, unused to being labeled so accurately. Lady Night winked at me and I shook my head, continuing to sweep the crowd, when a sound reached my ears.

*He’s coming.*

Those weird whispers again. Like when I’d seen the spirits in my grandparents’ barn. Right before…

A chill ran down my spine. Right before the plat-eyes had arrived.

I scanned the crowd. There, near the back of the club, was one of the creatures I’d thought was an ox, with the weird sunglasses.

You might think it strange that I said *one of the creatures I’d thought was an ox*, and you’d be perfectly justified in thinking that. However, one thing I need to make perfectly clear is THAT WASN’T AN OX!!!

“Anansi,” I whispered, “there’s a plat-eye in here.”

He glared at me. “Don’t you start…” His voice trailed off when he saw where the SBP’s camera was pointed. I pretended to move the phone around, but I kept it mostly on the plat-eye. Now that I studied the spirit, I didn’t see how I ever could’ve been fooled.

The sunglasses barely covered the creature’s giant white eyes. One horn was broken and dangling off the side of its head. Its fur was gray and matted, and clouds of steam trailed from its nostrils. The SBP outlined the creature in faint green, the same color Anansi’s adinkra glowed when there were iron monsters nearby, but I hesitated to jump to that conclusion. This wasn’t an iron monster…it was a creature from folktales. Now, what was it Nana had said about them? They could change shape and grow….

Before I could remember all the way back to…yesterday (wow, time flies when you’re saving the world), someone screamed.

I whipped around to find the second ox—no, of course, it was a plat-eye, too—standing next to the little brown girl with the pigtails. Her mother shielded her as the spirit stood on its hind legs and snorted. This one had three horns, the third peeking out from under its top hat. I really needed to work on my ability to see through shoddy disguises. If these were the same

two that had attacked me in the barn, they'd looked a lot better as rottweiler cats.

"Is anyone here *not* a plat-eye?" I shouted, hopping off the stage before shouting directions. "Gum Baby, you're with me! Ayanna, Junior, Lady Night, crowd control, please!"

The three of them nodded and spread out, directing people to a side exit. Lady Night spoke in a clear calm voice as Ayanna and Junior helped those who couldn't move fast. The patrons listened to them, thankfully, which left me, a ten-inch sap doll, and a god trapped in a smartphone to face two plat-eye monsters.

Light work.

"All right then, y'all wanted to crash the party," I told them. "Let's go!"

Gum Baby ran up my side and flipped onto my shoulder, sap balls in hand as she waited for one of the spirits to make the first move. I slipped the SBP into my shorts pocket, vowing not to let it get damaged again. Then, favoring my uninjured wrist, I raised my hands and dropped into a boxer's crouch. "C'mon, then!"

Several tense seconds passed. Then a minute. Still no one moved. The plat-eye duo shuffled their feet (hooves?) and kept glancing at each other. It was almost as if they were stalling. I jabbed a foot forward, feinting an attack, and they retreated. By this time the juke joint was empty, the enchanted drums tapping out a medium-tempo rhythm with the booming thump of the kick drum interrupting every so often. Ayanna and Junior returned and divided to take up stations on opposite sides of the room. We now had the plat-eyes surrounded.

Gum Baby shifted on my shoulder. "Are these cowboys gonna fight or what? HEY! ARE Y'ALL GONNA FIGHT?"

But it didn't seem like the monsters wanted to. In fact, the way they snorted and tossed their heads at each other, it was almost as if each was trying to convince the other to make the first move. Like a dare. Or they were trying to work up the courage to…

"They've got something to say," I said slowly.

"What?" Gum Baby accidentally smooshed a sap ball in my face as she turned to look at me. "Say something? What're they gonna say? Moo? Speak up, Bumbletongue. You can't just start talking to Gum Baby and not finish your sentence."

I wiped sap from my lips and glared at her. “I *said,* I think they’ve got something to say, but I can’t understand it. We need a translator, something that can help me with…”

The SBP vibrated in my pocket at the same time that I realized the answer to my problem. When I took it out, Anansi was leaning against the edge of the screen eating an apple he’d pulled from…Actually, I had no idea where he’d pulled that apple from. He tossed the core away and it disintegrated into pixels as he brushed his hands on his pants. “So…are you ready to listen?”

“Yes,” I said, straightening. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good. I seem to remember your grandmother telling you about the plat-eyes, and what they represented. Do you?”

I wrinkled my forehead as I tried to think. “They’re spirits that can’t move on. There’s something they need to get done, and they haunt the person they think can help them.”

Anansi nodded, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a giant wallet. He opened it and flipped through the billfold like a rich person searching for a bill smaller than a hundred. But it wasn’t money he pulled out.

“Ah, there it is.” He stuck in his fingers, then his whole arm, until his shoulder had nearly disappeared into the wallet, and emerged with a rounded rectangular app clutched in his hand. The icon had a glittering black background with a single uppercase letter *D* in the center that flickered from red to green. Anansi tossed it into the air, where it began to spin slowly in the middle of the screen.

“What is that?” I asked, keeping an eye on the milling plat-eyes at the same time.

“That, my boy, is the Diaspor-app.”

“It’s bigger than the others.”

“It better be. All those permissions you were so kind as to grant me? They went into the construction of this beauty. It’s your one-stop shop for everything dealing with the Diaspora. Those stories you collected? They will be sorted and categorized, and you will be able to trace their origins and also the relationships between them. Ever wonder why Brer Rabbit’s stories are so similar to my own? Find the roots. Mine are the originals, of course, but that’s a lesson for another day. Right now, you need a translator.

Well, pop open this one-of-a-kind web app and watch the language barrier disappear."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Go ahead," Anansi said. "Give it a whirl. Sure beats standing around doing a whole lotta nothing."

"Tristan?" Ayanna called. "Is everything all right?"

Gum Baby tossed sap balls menacingly. "No, it ain't all right! He's gonna try and talk it out! Can you believe that? Gum Baby came with two tickets to the gum show, and she ain't handing out rain checks."

I ignored them all and tapped the icon. The SBP vibrated twice, and then the screen went black. After a few seconds, a pulsating amber globe appeared and started to rotate. I waited for something else to happen, but nothing did.

"Sooo," I started to say, but I stopped when the globe pulsed sharply. It was reacting to my voice. I looked at it, then up at the plat-eyes, then back at the orb. "No way," I muttered. The sphere transformed into Anansi's face, and he winked at me before it immediately reverted to the globe. "Fine."

I took a long, deep breath and stepped off the stage and down to the dance floor. Slowly, and I mean very, *very* slowly, I walked over to the two plat-eyes. They stamped their hooves nervously and snorted giant spouts of steam, but they didn't attack. I edged closer and held out the phone.

"Okay," I said, looking between the two of them. "I'm here. I'm listening. What are you trying to tell me?"

The golden sphere contorted and expanded as the plat-eyes in oxen form began to snort and stamp and bellow. The icon stretched and unfolded, and shapes appeared from the tangled mess. The shapes became houses and trees, people and creatures, and I watched as MidPass came to life on the screen. This is the story the plat-eyes told:

Once a brother and sister lived with their father on a small farm. When their father traveled for work, they did as most children are wont to do when their parents are away—they played games, sang songs, and tried not to make *too* big of a mess. Every day, the father would come home and sweep them into his giant arms and march around the farm telling them stories and tickling them until they thought their sides would split. It was a wonderful time, but such times must always come to an end.

The brother and sister had an uncle—a close friend of their father's, really, but he was always around, so that's what they called him. He and their father were pals from way back, the kind of friends who knew what the other was thinking without it ever being said. The two friends would sit on the front porch of the farmhouse long after the brother and sister were supposed to be in bed, and talk in low voices about the state of the world and the trouble on the horizon. They would make plans, emergency steps they hoped would never be necessary, and sit quietly afterward until Uncle flashed a gentle smile, clapped their father on the back, and headed off into the forest.

Brother and Sister thought nothing of it. They played games beneath the forest canopy, sang songs by the stream, and tried not to make *too* big of a mess.

One afternoon Brother thought he heard screams coming from deep in the forest.

One morning Sister thought she smelled smoke drifting through the trees.

They never told their father about these things, because they didn't want to worry him. They wanted his stories and his laugh and his threats of tickles, not his fear and sorrow. So they ignored the growing unease in the forest and did what children do.

They played games.

They sang songs.

They tried not to make *too* big of a mess.

Then Uncle stopped coming around. Brother and Sister missed his easy smile, the way he let them ride his reddish-gray tail as he marched around pretending to look for them. Their father missed him, too. He grew moody and distant, and at night he would stand on the porch and stare into the darkness. Brother and Sister tried to cheer him up by playing and singing, but each day it took more and more to pull their father out of his depression.

He left one morning as he always did, off to search for something. He never found it, but he was always looking. Brother and Sister didn't know what *it* was exactly, only that it was special, precious, and something a lot of people were after.

The fires swept through the forest that afternoon.

And with them came the monsters.

When the smoke cleared, Brother and Sister waited and waited for their father to come home. They wanted him to sweep them up in his giant furry arms and tickle them with his massive paws. They wanted to play and to sing, but for some reason they couldn't.

Father finally came home, tired and hoarse from shouting, his shaggy fur smoking and his eyes watering. Brother and Sister tried to talk to him, but he couldn't see them. His eyes passed right over them. He couldn't hear them, either, no matter how loud they shouted. His paws brushed right through them. What was the matter? Why couldn't he find them?

They watched him sit and shed tear after tear, and Brother and Sister cried with him, though he couldn't hear their sniffles. They watched day after day as he searched for them, calling their names, even though they were right there.

Father started talking to himself. Muttering about a boy who could talk to spirits, a boy who saw the living and the dead. A boy who ripped a hole in the sky, who made friends with gods and enemies of evil. A boy who brought the monsters to the forest, and who'd taken everything. He wanted to find that boy, to shout and scream and ask him why, why couldn't he find his children.

Brother and Sister wanted to find the boy, too.

He could help them talk to their father.

I let the arm holding the SBP drop to my side and stared at the plat-eyes. They were…they had to be the brother and sister in the story. They'd suffered so much. Lost so much. And they'd been trying so long just to get their father to see them, to understand that though they were spirits, they were still here. That was their mission, their reason for hanging around.

And I could help them accomplish it.

There were just two big problems standing in my way. First, their father blamed me for their loss. To be honest, I could understand why. I did punch a hole in the sky, letting a haint into Alke, and riling up the iron monsters and the Maafa that controlled them. Yes, I had fixed my mistake (with help from others), but it had cost a lot of people dearly.

The second problem was I knew who their father was—the Shamble Man. But you saw that coming. What you probably didn't see coming is that I knew who was underneath the mask. And from the way Anansi's

adinkra was burning my wrist, he was on his way. In fact, any second now —

*BOOM!*

The back of the juke joint shook as something massive landed on the roof. The plat-eyes vanished, the frightened expressions on their faces the last thing I saw. Giant footsteps shook the foundation as they marched toward the front of the building. A heavy thump sounded just outside the door. I took a step forward and tried to calm my nerves in preparation to meet my nemesis.

See, I'd recognized someone in the plat-eye siblings' story. I'd know that reddish-silver tail anywhere. It was Brer Fox, though when I'd met him he just went by Fox. Which meant the Shamble Man was…

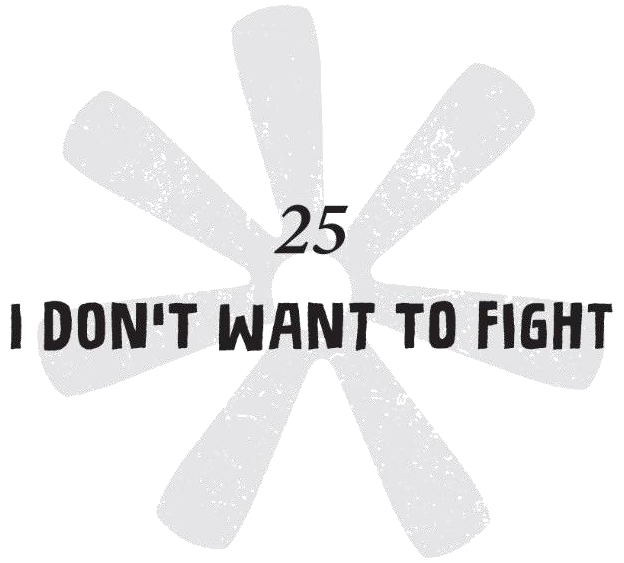
*WHAM!*

The double doors exploded inward as a huge foot kicked them in. Junior yelped and hurled a stone, only to fling himself to the ground when a paw batted it back at him. The Shamble Man stepped through the dust. His iron-monster armor had the fading glow of cooling coals. I barely noticed. Instead, I studied the profile of the villain who'd kidnapped Nana, kidnapped Mami Wata, and stolen the weapons of the gods to do who knows what. How could I not have recognized him before? His hood had been pulled low, sure, and his fur was missing in patches. The armor covered up a lot, but now that I had seen the story, his demeanor seemed unmistakable.

"Little hero, *grum grum*. We meet again."

I squared my shoulders and looked straight into the twisted amber mask, and the bloodshot eyes behind it.

"Hello, Brer Bear."



# 25
# I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT

**IN NANA'S STORIES, BRER BEAR WAS A HULKING ANTAGONIST TO** Brer Rabbit. He was the muscle for Fox's conniving plans, the one who stood in the background and growled or gnashed his teeth as needed. He never really acted of his own free will. An enforcer, that's what he was. And, like all the larger foes that Brer Rabbit faced, Bear often ended up on the wrong side of the story.

Most of the time Nana would end the stories with Brer Rabbit escaping, Fox and Bear made to look like fools once again. But sometimes—and I loved when this happened—she would raise her hand before I could move from my seat at the foot of her rocking chair. My parents had bought that chair just for her visits, and the *creak, creak, creak* of the wood as she rocked to and fro was like music to my ears. She'd lean forward, hand raised, and a look would cross her face.

"Just a minute now, boy," she'd say. "I ain't finished just yet. There's more to this here tale."

And so I'd stay, and Nana would stare off at nothing and gather her thoughts, pulling them together just as her knitting needles pulled yarn into a growing blanket.

After one tale about Brer Rabbit, Fox, and Bear, she said, "You ain't always gonna be able to outwit everyone who wants to take you down a peg. Can't talk your way out of everything, can't outsmart everybody. One day, someone bigger, stronger, and faster is gonna test your limits. You hear me, child?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her needles clicked and her rocking chair creaked. “You’d better. Because right or wrong, you gonna be tried and tried again, and the Brer Bears of the world will hound you from one corner of the earth to the other. They have the power and the strength and the stamina to do it. Whether it’s with laws or water hoses, *they will do it.* Never forget that.”

I remember watching Nana, her eyes trained on something long past, before she turned to me and said fiercely, “Do you know how to fight against somethin’ like that, somethin’ that knocks you down and tells you to stay down if you know what’s good for you? Do you know how to beat that?”

I shook my head, silent.

Her golden quilting needle pointed at me, and Nana leaned forward. “You get. Back. Up.”

*Boom tiss boom tiss rat-a-tat-tat*

*Boom tiss boom tiss rat-a-tat-tat*

The enchanted drumsticks tapped out a soft rhythm as the confrontation unfolded. Background music to a showdown that scared the living daylights out of me. Dust still drifted in slow swirls from the destroyed doorway, and the lights flickered every couple of seconds. I stood on one side of the dance floor, Ayanna and Junior on either side of me, and Bear loomed over us even from across the room. Moonlight spilled around his frame to give him an otherworldly glow. At least he hadn’t brought John Henry’s hammer.

He took a step forward out of the light, and his lopsided amber mask shifted.

Bear was smiling.

“Clever little hero. Thinks he figured it all out. Give him a medal, *grum grum.*” He brought his massive paws together twice in feigned applause, and I swallowed as light glinted off his claws. Each was the size of one of my fingers and looked frighteningly sharp.

“I don’t want to fight you,” I said slowly. I was proud of the way my voice didn’t quaver. “I know what you’re looking for. Let me help you. You don’t have to do whatever it is you’re thinking about. We can work together and—”

Bear's laugh boomed around the room, nearly shaking the floor. His fetterling armor rattled and clanked as he grabbed his stomach and threw back his head. I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists.

"Just stop this!" I shouted. "I know you're looking for your two chil—" "Move, fool!" yelled Gum Baby.

If she hadn't warned me, I would've been pulverized. Bear's movements were lightning fast, unfair for a creature of his size. With a lunge I only saw in a blur, he crossed the dance floor with a loud snarl. A single shaggy paw, with hullbeast armor fitted around his arm, crashed into the floor where I'd been standing moments ago. I guess he didn't need the hammer. I dove to the right, rolling over several times and knocking over chairs in the process, my heart in my throat.

Gum Baby flipped into the air, hurling sap ball after sap ball at the mask, but Bear batted them away easily with the backs of his paws, where the fetterling armor was thickest. She tried to scamper away, but she'd gotten too close to him. Bear kicked her across the room and she bounced twice and skidded out through the broken doorway. Then, with both front paws, he slapped the floor again in rage.

"YOU WILL NOT SPEAK OF THEM!" Bear roared.

My chest pounded as I rolled to my feet, my fingers itching to curl and bring forth the akofena shadow gloves. But he didn't press the attack. The hulking giant slowly stood on his hind paws again, bits of the splintered wooden floor sprinkling the ground as he did. His mask rippled as a black shadow swam across it, catching my eye and making me pause. There was something familiar….

"Do not," he said slowly, wresting my attention away from the mask, "speak of them. You do not have that right. You may have deceived the others, *grum grum,* but I know what you truly are."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Tristan…" Junior said in warning. I looked at him, and he made a *Calm down* motion. But I wasn't the one attacking people! I began to tell him that, but Bear cut me off.

"You're a coward," Bear sneered. "A traitor. A betrayer."

I shook my head, anger pushing its way past the fear in my chest. "Says a god of MidPass. I'm not the one who attacked his friends and is kidnapping others in this world and outside of it! You're the traitor. Do you know what you did to John Henry? He is *dying*!"

A small sob sounded. Ayanna had both hands covering her mouth as she stared at me in disbelief. She turned to Junior, who nodded slowly. “What do you mean, dying?” She looked at Bear, tears welling up in her eyes. “You attacked your *friend*?”

“Everything I do is for the good of Alke.” There was a note of sadness in Bear’s voice, but it was soon drowned out as he thumped the hullbeast chest plate, the echo of it syncing eerily with the enchanted drums. “I carry her enemies so she doesn’t have to shoulder the burden.”

“I defeated those enemies!”

“You cowered in fear as your friends were attacked mercilessly,” Bear said. He leaned forward. “Was it you who defeated this creature, or was it a magical ax? When flames devoured MidPass, did you carry the weak and the sick across the Burning Sea? Who enraged the monsters in the first place? Where were you when MidPass needed you most? Hmm? WHERE?”

His questions ate away at my core, robbing me of my anger and leaving me shaken. “I tried—”

“You failed.” Bear spat the words out like poison. “And we all suffered as a result.”

A soft groan floated in from outside. Gum Baby? I wanted to check on her, but I couldn’t see a way to get around the armored god. And neither Anansi nor the SBP were going to be of any help now. Unless…

An idea sprang into my head. The SBP was in the pocket of my shorts, and I let my left hand drop to tap the phone through the fabric. In response, I heard a couple of muffled words I probably shouldn’t repeat.

“When the other gods catch you,” I said loudly, raising my fists, “you’ll suffer some more. It’s only a matter of time.”

Bear scoffed. “Those fools are too busy holding a pointless summit, squabbling over who is in charge of what, like mice over crumbs. Without his hammer John Henry is toothless and dying the slow death of the forgotten. Your crow-loving bumpkin High John has disappeared again, and even if he were here, he wouldn’t lift a finger to help an Alkean—he and Nyame argue all day long. And I will pluck your winged goddesses clean if they so much as flap a feather in my direction. No, little hero, you’re on your own, *grum grum*.”

“He’s not alone,” Ayanna said, raising her staff.

Junior groaned and muttered, “Here we go again,” but still he withdrew two stones from his satchel, one in each hand. They stood shoulder to shoulder with me. At that moment it didn’t matter if my wrist was injured, if I couldn’t use all the adinkra charms, or even if the odds were against us. They had my back and I had theirs. That’s what mattered.

Then Bear turned to look at Junior.

The boy wouldn’t meet his eyes. Junior held his stones at the ready, but he kept shifting his weight, bouncing first on one foot and then the other, as if he were nervous. As if he didn’t want to look at Bear full-on out of fear. Fear that—

“I know you,” Bear rumbled. The mask tilted as Bear studied Junior. “Yesss, I believe I do.”

I took a step forward. “Leave him alone. You’re dealing with me right now.”

The mask turned to me, then back to Junior, and—to my surprise—Bear started to laugh. “He doesn’t know. The little hero, *grum grum,* the know-it-all, has no idea. Even with the eyes of the gods, he can’t see what’s plain in front of his face. Oh, well. Soon it won’t matter at all.”

What was he talking about? I looked at Junior for a clue, but he avoided my gaze, too.

Frustration and anger spiked through me, and I pointed at the hulking god-turned-traitor. “We’ve stopped all your flunkies. Kulture Vulture. Big Big. We can stop you, too.”

Instead of shouting like I thought he would, Bear sighed. “I came here hoping you would. Your grandmother said as much to me.”

I froze.

Nana.

“She had such high hopes for you. But if you cannot discern enemies from friends, I see she was mistaken. We all were. You are a boy pretending to be a man, waving around the powers of the gods with no idea of what to do next. So it is. So it shall remain.” Bear started to pivot to exit the juke joint.

Stung, I clenched both fists, not caring about the pain in my wrist. “That’s it? You’re just going to turn your back on all the damage you did, just like before? You don’t care about anyone but yourself! Did you even mourn Fox? Or Brer Rabbit?”

He stopped in his tracks.

The SBP vibrated against my thigh. Anansi understood what I was trying to do. Now all I had to do was stall. If I could keep Bear talking, maybe, just maybe, the other gods would come and help take down one of their own. From the look Bear turned on me, a baleful scowl practically glowing from behind the mask he wore, stalling might be my last resort.

"What did you say?" His voice, though soft, rumbled like a muscle car getting ready to accelerate. "What…did you just say?"

"I said, what about Brer Rabbit and Fox? Your friends. You all used to __"

The giant grizzly exploded across the dance floor, one massive paw lifting me off the ground by the throat and slamming me against the wall behind me, driving the breath out of my lungs and causing pain to shoot through the back of my skull. Ayanna screamed, and Junior was knocked aside by Bear's other paw. The enchanted drum set toppled over at the impact and the furniture shuddered, as if unwilling to witness what was about to happen next.

Bear leaned in close, so I could see every putrid lump and bubbling pustule in the shifting amber mask. Beneath the surface the oily shadow I'd seen before shifted back and forth. I narrowed my eyes at it, which didn't help my headache, but I didn't get a chance to investigate, because Bear opened his mouth and a harsh snarl slipped through teeth the size of knives.

"You don't get to say those names," he said softly, inches from my face. "Your very existence is a betrayal of their lives. Fox is dead thanks to you. Brer Rabbit was kidnapped and held captive, and now he clings to life because of that little bug you're so buddy-buddy with, whose offspring plots under your very nose. You…sicken me."

I stopped struggling for a moment, stunned. I looked at Junior.

He opened his mouth, paused, then looked away.

"Yesss," Bear hissed. "You see it now. Too little, too late, *grum grum.*" Still gripping me tightly with one paw, Bear used the other to pull up my left wrist. I was terrified he was going to take my adinkra bracelet, but instead, he outlined my hand with a wicked sharp claw. "Where are those blessed gloves of yours, hmm? Did you lose them like the little boy you are?"

I squirmed and gasped for air.

"Tristan Strong punched a hole in the sky," Bear said in a whisper. "And brought the evil in."

A chill slid down my spine. “No,” I said.

“Cities burned, now what did we learn?” He bared his teeth at me. “Don’t let him do it again.”

He let go of my throat and I slid to the floor with a jarring *thump*. I coughed and rubbed at where his claws had pricked my neck. “Where is my nana?” I said with a rasp. “What have you done with her?”

Bear winced for the first time. “That yammering old lady is safe. For now. But she won’t be for long…not if I don’t get what I want.”

“What do you want? The Story Box?”

He laughed, then scooped me off the floor and flung me across the room. I landed hard on my shoulder, and lightning shot down my whole right arm. “Keep your stories, little hero. You can use them to entertain your friends when I bring your world down on your head.”

“Then what?” I shouted in pain. “Just give me back my grandmother!”

“YOU CAN’T HAVE HER BACK!” Bear roared. “I want you to suffer! You hear me? Suffer! I’m taking from you what you took from me. Someone you care about, *grum grum,* and they will die, just like you will, knowing that you failed to save them. Just like you failed to save MidPass.”

“Your children—”

An earsplitting growl shook the juke joint as Bear launched himself forward, his hind paw crashing into my chest and pinning me down. Stars bloomed in front of my eyes. My fingers feebly struggled for the pocket where the SBP was.

Bear laughed and shook his head. “What, you think I don’t know about your plan?”

He lifted his paw off me and I froze.

“Go on. Call your gods. They won’t come even if you beg them to save you. They are leaderless, divided, squabbling like children forced to share. You are alone, Tristan Strong, champion of MidPass, warrior from the Battle of the Bay. Scream for your gods. I would rip them to pieces in front of you if they dared to show their faces. CALL THEM!”

My fingers hovered over my pocket, eyes prickling with tears as my lungs wheezed. Was he right? Had the loss of John Henry thrown everyone into disarray? Were they afraid? Fear gripped me tight, a block of ice around my chest, and Bear began to cackle.

Not laugh, cackle.

I dropped my hand.

“Pathetic,” Bear said. “I’d planned to let you live to see the destruction you will be blamed for. But now your presence is a stain on everything that all *except for you* have sacrificed. Better to crush you like the bug you shelter in your pocket, *grum grum.*”

He stepped outside for a moment, and I heard a woman’s cry of surprise and pain. Bear came back in with John Henry’s hammer. The massive symbol of MidPass’s strongest god looked warped in Bear’s claws, and as he gripped the handle, the iron head began to glow with a pale-green fire. “Your world will burn, little hero. And everyone will think you did it. Again.”

Bear raised the hammer over me with both paws, his face twisted into a snarl. I closed my eyes.

*Thok, thok, thok*

Stones hammered Bear’s mask, knocking it askew and sending him reeling backward in outrage. Junior stood on the stage, his hands a blur as he threw with painful accuracy. Fear was written all over his face, but his mouth was pressed thin and he didn’t flinch as Bear roared with each blow.

I scrambled away and took refuge under a table in the back.

*CRASH!*

Bear stumbled as the drum set from the stage launched itself at him, the snare and the hi-hat cymbals colliding with his mask. The kick drum flew across the room and knocked into his legs, sending him crashing to the floor. The drumsticks battered his head and poked at his eyes through the holes in the mask.

I gawked at the sight.

“This is my home, and no one disrespects me in my home.”

The pain-laden shout came from the broken front doors. Lady Night leaned against Ayanna. Swirling lavender smoke hovered above her right hand. She whispered to it, then lobbed the spell at the overturned tables and chairs, where it exploded into a silver-and-lavender cloud. The effort nearly forced her to double over in agony.

Rumbling, scraping sounds filled the room, and the chairs and tables assembled themselves into five large figures that hurled themselves at Bear. The god roared his challenge and smashed the first two into pieces with his stolen hammer.

“I’m not going to be able to keep this up much longer,” Lady Night grunted.

She stood upright and shoved Ayanna toward the door. “You have

to go now. Hurry! The magic will keep him busy for a while. Tristan, find your grandmother and Mami Wata and stop this before it's too late." She hurled another spell, sending a second wave of musical instruments crashing into Bear's face.

"Junior, let's go!" I called.

He glanced at me, then shook his head and redoubled his efforts. The stones he had already cast flew back into his hands and then across the room to pummel Bear again. How could I have missed the fact that he was one of Anansi's six sons? It was so obvious now. The same brown skin, the quirky smile, and then there was his special talent: throwing stones with laser-like accuracy. No wonder Nyame wanted to keep such a close eye on him.

I hesitated, then called, "Stone Thrower!"

The SBP buzzed in alarm in my pocket. I winced. Onstage, the boy smiled, then shook his head. "Go!" he shouted. "Just go!" Three stones pinged in quick succession, landing in a narrow gap between the armor on Bear's wrist. The god roared and the hammer dropped to the floor.

"Tristan, come on!" Ayanna shouted.

I limped to my feet and paused, torn. Junior tossed a few more stones, glanced over at me, and gave me a mock salute. "Do better, hero," he said, right before he hurled a stone that thumped me in the chest and sent me stumbling backward through the ruined door. "Someday I still have to tell my father that story."

Outside, the night sky had begun to lighten at the creases where the horizon watched from a safe distance. Gum Baby lay motionless on the ground, dust coating her still form. I scooped her up and limped to the pilot raft, hesitated, then climbed aboard. Nana was still out there somewhere, waiting for me. Ayanna followed and quickly took over, sending us up into the storm clouds. We both looked back in horror as another roar exploded into the darkness.

# 26
# GET BACK UP

**“TRISTAN STRONG PUNCHED A HOLE IN THE SKY,” I MUTTERED,** fists clenched so tight my fingernails threatened to pierce my palms. The pain from my right wrist raced up into my elbow, but I ignored it. “And let the evil in.”

“Tristan?”

What was I supposed to do now? Bear was too strong. The other gods were scared to face him, and John Henry was barely clinging to his stories. What chance did a skinny kid from Chicago have?

“Tristan? Are you listening? Tristan!”

I lifted my head from my knees, which I was clutching to my chest while sitting in the middle of the raft. We floated above another dry riverbed leading north to the Golden Crescent. A further reminder of how Alke was falling apart and I couldn’t do anything about it. When I tried to work with my friends to save people, I failed. When I tried to do things on my own, I failed. It felt as if a boulder had settled onto my shoulders, driving me to the ground and anchoring me in place.

“Tristan?”

Ayanna knelt in front of me, the SBP in her hand and a look of concern on her face. In my head I saw the juke joint collapsing, Lady Night and Junior inside, and my eyes welled up with tears. Lady Night had helped so many refugees from MidPass, and now she was gone. And I’d been so mean to Stone Thrower at first, when all he was trying to do was overcome his family legacy.

I knew something about that, and yet I'd failed him. I'd failed them both.

"Tristan!" Anansi peered out of the screen, a worried expression on his face as Ayanna leaned forward to put her hand on my shoulder. "We've got to keep moving."

"For what?" I muttered.

"Your grandmother! Your friends, your world, everything!" Ayanna threw up her hands. "What do you mean, for what? Your world and mine are in trouble if we don't stop that mangy-furred cretin!"

I looked around. The sun was just rising over the tip of Isihlangu to the east. It covered the mountain range in a gold-and-pink blanket of light that reminded me of Nana's quilt, a warm layer of comfort and reassurance. Somehow I was still wearing the backpack, though at this point I couldn't figure out why. For a brief moment I thought about flying to the fortress city of the Ridgefolk and begging them to hide me. But if everyone blamed me like Bear did, would they even open the door?

Ahead of us, the Golden Crescent sparkled like a polished crown. The gilded city was a distant glow on the horizon, like an early sunrise in a world of night. And yet the beauty didn't do anything for me. Who could care about beauty amid so much destruction? I couldn't look at it without remembering the iron monsters flooding the shores of the seaside city, the rotted corpse of the Maafa squatting in the bay like a hungry leviathan. I didn't want to see that happen again. But what could I do?

"Tristan. It's time to act, boy."

I looked down to see Anansi staring out at me. His face was so similar to that of the kid I'd just left behind to face Bear's wrath. For once, there was no mischievous smile or glint in the spider god's eyes. Only sadness.

"Is it true?" I asked, knowing the answer but wanting to hear the trickster god confirm it. I couldn't move until I did. "Was Junior…Is Junior your son?"

Ayanna looked back and forth between the phone and me, resignation warring with the need to keep moving, to keep busy, rather than deal with losing someone close. I knew that feeling well.

"It's wild…" I said. "The last story Nana told me, the only one I can still remember clear as day, was about Anansi and his six children. Whenever the trickster got himself into trouble, his sons had to come bail him out. He might've been eaten by a giant fish or a giant bird, but no

matter the conundrum, his boys had his back." I shook my head. "I guess it's true…even when he's trapped inside a phone."

Anansi smiled softly. "Ah, yes. They're good boys, my sons. Trouble Seer, Road Builder, River Drinker, Game Skinner, Ground Pillow…and Stone Thrower."

Junior's face popped into my mind, along with the cross-body satchel he'd always kept close. It looked like he'd never be able to tell the story about his father…. Did Anansi know that Stone Thrower had sacrificed himself for their sake?

Just then, Gum Baby groaned and began to stir, which was a good thing, because I'd started to get worried about her, too. How long can a doll stay unconscious?

"*Unnngh.* Gum Baby needs to go easy on the chocolate milk next time." She sat up slowly while holding her head in her hands.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, Gum Baby's gone to rougher parties." Then she dropped her hands and hopped to her feet, her little fists balled as she searched the area. "Where is he? Where's that evil teddy bear? Gum Baby's gonna pound his face into mush!"

When she realized we were no longer in the juke joint, she dropped her hands, confused. "What's wrong? Why ain't y'all taking Gum Baby to the next fight? Did we win?"

"No." I sighed and sat down on the edge of the raft, letting my legs dangle over the edge as I stared at the muddy remains of one of Mami Wata's rivers. "No, we didn't win. We lost. We lost Mami Wata, we lost my nana, we lost Alke. Bear won. I couldn't beat him."

"Did you try?" Gum Baby climbed into Ayanna's lap and cradled the SBP in her arms. Anansi stared unhappily at a smear of sap on the screen.

"She's right," Ayanna said. "Can't win anything if you don't try." "What's the point? He can whip me seven ways from Sunday. He's done it twice already. He even beat John Henry! What am I supposed to do against that? Hope? I don't have any more of that. I'm clean out."

"What would your grandmother say?" Anansi asked, ducking under an app as the sap continued to roll down the screen. "Would she want you to give up without even attempting to fight?"

"I. Can't. Win." Why couldn't they understand that? This was when you threw in the towel. When you stopped the fight. I'd have to find some other

hero to save the world. Nana would understand, wouldn't she?

Wouldn't she?

The sun finally rose above Isihlangu—maybe for the last time. Bear was going to do something horrific, the gods of MidPass and Alke couldn't make up their minds about what to do to prevent that from happening, and I was useless.

*Get back up.*

The thought popped into my head like Nana herself was speaking in my ear. I shook my head and tried to ignore it.

*Get back up.*

"No," I said out loud. "Just to lose again? No."

Anansi and Gum Baby exchanged a look. They probably thought the stress was getting to me. Maybe it was. I was arguing with myself…and losing at that.

*Get. Back. Up.*

"He's just gonna win again, so what does it matter?" I folded my arms across my chest, well aware it looked like I was sulking, which was fine, because that's exactly what I was doing.

"Uh, Bumbletongue?" Gum Baby asked carefully. "Who are you talking to?"

But I flapped her question away and hopped to my feet, rocking the raft dangerously. "How am I supposed to fight against irrational outbursts? Or misplaced anger? Yes, I ripped open the sky the first time, but I didn't light MidPass on fire! That was the iron monsters, and King Cotton. And we beat them back to the bottom of the sea, together! But Bear won't listen to that. He's…he's…"

"Bear's dealing with trauma," Anansi said gently. "And he's not handling it well."

That stopped me mid-rant. Trauma. Nana had mentioned that trauma was a deeply distressing event. I guess I'd never really thought about it before, but losing someone you cared about was traumatic—it lingered with you for days and months. Years, even.

Eddie's death still lingered with me.

And just the thought of losing Nana was tearing my heart in two.

Everyone from MidPass who'd had to watch their homes burn or see their loved ones be ripped from them and taken away—that was traumatic.

And Bear…losing his children. His best friend. His home.

Yeah, all that was trauma.

"But," I said slowly, "how could he then turn around and inflict more trauma on others?"

Gum Baby hopped off Ayanna's lap and scrambled onto my shoulders as I knelt and picked up the SBP, wiping the screen on my shorts.

Ayanna pursed her lips. "Some of the folks from MidPass used to lash out in the days immediately after…well, when the iron monsters were defeated. Never like this, though."

Anansi nodded. "Something has wormed into Bear's head and poisoned his thoughts against the rest of the world. Both worlds. It's like he doesn't care anymore and just wants to cause as much mayhem and destruction as possible."

Something stirred loose in the back of my mind. "Poisoned his thoughts…"

*The amber mask.*

*The oily shadow.*

*Poisoned his thoughts.*

"Oh no," I whispered, horrified. I hurled myself at the rudder at the back of the raft, jerking it forward and shooting the vessel into the sky. I pointed it west—beyond the Golden Crescent.

"Hold it, Tristan, where are you taking us?" Ayanna shouted as we zoomed off.

I bit my lip and crossed my fingers and toes, praying that I was wrong. I so wanted to be wrong. But if I wasn't…Sweet peaches, I didn't want to think about that.

"Tristan?"

We sped through the breaking dawn. "I'm going to talk with an old friend."

Not too long ago, archeologists found the last ship to bring Africans across the ocean to America. The *Clotilda*, it was called, a wooden vessel of nightmares and horror. It was discovered in the Mobile River in Alabama. Wild, right? I'd thought about asking my grandparents to drive me to where they were planning to display it, to take a look at the tool of a terror that had severed families, friends, and communities again and again.

I never did ask, though.

Maybe the memory of another slave ship kept me silent. The hulls filled with disease and despair, the holds stuffed with shackled prisoners—those images still haunted me some nights. The folks I hadn't been able to save.

After learning about the *Clotilda* I'd wondered whether its reemergence all these centuries later had caused trauma in the descendants of abducted Africans.

Or what if it had the opposite effect? Sometimes, as Nana used to say, the only way to get rid of a boil is to lance it. (I think that means cut it with a knife and not with a jousting spear like I originally thought.) The point is, you have to experience some pain in order to begin healing.

Right now, if Alke was going to begin the process of healing the trauma caused by King Cotton and the iron monsters, we were going to have to lance a boil, and that boil was Bear.

But to do that, I had to raise another slave ship.

I needed to speak with the Maafa.

# 27
# RETURN OF THE MAAFA

**THE RAFT ZOOMED THROUGH PINK-TINGED CLOUDS AND THE COOL** dawn air. East of us, the towers and minarets of the Golden Crescent began to emerge, shining like a bunch of Nana's golden-tipped quilting needles had been plunged into the earth. The sight made my heart lurch, and doubt tried to creep back into my mind, but I forced it away. *She'll be all right,* I said over and over to myself, clutching the scraps of her quilt tight to my chest. Bear had said my grandmother was safe—for now. But if the suspicion growing in my mind was true, it was possible that soon no one would be safe.

The grand palaces of the Golden Crescent began to appear, growing out of the horizon in all their splendor. Any other time and I would've gawked at the sight. They had never failed to amaze me before. This time I barely glanced at them. My eyes were fixed on the smear of blue to the west of them.

We zipped past the forest palace of the Mmoatia, the forest fairies who had healed many of those injured in the fight with the iron monsters. Ayanna had taken over, muttering something about flying without a pilot's license, and we soared by Nyame's palace, grander and larger than them all, with his giant golden statues that served as bodyguards. Repairs were still ongoing, and my eyes lingered just a bit as I sent good thoughts to John Henry.

*Just hold on,* I told him.

It seemed like I was saying that to everyone these days.

And then we reached the bay. Ayanna put on more speed, looking at me every so often so I could give her directions. We headed out over the still water, deep and calm. In the distance I could see a smudge of gray and glints of orange. MidPass, and the Burning Sea that surrounded it. Right now it appeared that the flaming waves were under control, but I didn't want to risk staying out over the dangerous water any longer than necessary. I still remembered the bone ships and their haunting cries as they chased me and Gum Baby.

Finally, I took a deep breath. "Here!" I shouted.

Ayanna raised her eyebrows but brought the raft down slowly, until we were floating just above the sea. A gust of wind swirled around us, setting several white-capped waves ablaze.

"I hope you know what you're doing, boy," Anansi said. I clutched the SBP in my left hand. My right held the adinkra bracelet, and I rotated it slowly and made a fist every so often just to keep it loose. It still hurt, but not as much as before.

"I hope so, too," I muttered.

So…how do you call forth the disassembled wreckage of a haunted slave ship?

On the phone, of course. Anansi and I had worked it out, and it turned out to be really simple.

"Here we go." I opened up the Contacts app in the SBP, spelled out *M-a-a-f-a*, and then watched the icon of a small ship appear. It still tripped me out how the phone-that-was-absolutely-a-phone-and-not-a-magical-story-box worked sometimes. I tapped the icon, then sat the phone on the deck of the raft and clasped the imbongi bead I'd gotten from the Ridgefolk. "Maafa!" I shouted. "Maafa! I need to speak with you."

The surface of the water remained still.

I took a deep breath, focused on a mental image of the ship lying in pieces at the bottom of the sea, and shouted again. "MAAFA! I know you can hear me. This is long distance, hurry!"

Gum Baby scratched her head in confusion. "What does 'long distance' mean?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but Granddad always shouted that when someone took their sweet time getting to the phone."

"Ohhh. It must be a threat. Gum Baby's gonna use that. 'These hands are long distance, thistle-head!'"

Before I could respond (everything was always so violent with that doll), the surface of the water bubbled a few dozen yards away. Then it started to steam, and fiery waterspouts began to form. I eyed our position nervously but didn't move. This would all be over soon. Hopefully.

*Whoosh!*

A giant beam of rotted wood erupted out of the sea and shot into the air like a rocket. Streams of burning water fell from it as it crashed back down and sent a giant wave surging past us. If Ayanna hadn't sent us shooting backward, we might've been roasted. I could feel the heat singeing my eyebrows. Another beam broke the surface, then another. Plank after plank rose out of the sea with eerie precision. Tangled ropes and slimy black seaweed snaked around them, knitting them into a strange jumble that began to look more and more familiar.

A curving hull.

A broken mast.

Tattered sails.

Soon, the bloated carcass of a slave ship floated in front of me. A jagged hole the size of John Henry had formed in the hull just above the water line, and with two broken spars jutting out near the remains of the top deck above it, it looked as if the Maafa had gained a face.

A sneering, hungry face.

Plus, the slave ship was huge. I'd forgotten how large it was. It easily dwarfed some of the palaces back on land. Still, I had business to handle and two worlds to save.

"Can you bring us in closer?" I asked Ayanna.

She shot me one of her patented *Are you serious?* looks but used her staff to move us a teeny bit nearer to the ship.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Something heavy was moving through the wreckage. Even broken, the Maafa still had a deck that loomed over us, and we couldn't float any higher because of tangled rigging and jagged wooden masts that curled down toward us like claws.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Whatever was up there sounded significant. I took a deep breath and prepared to face the worst thing I could possibly imagine.

"Ah, the Anansesem. Good. Good."

I froze. I hadn't imagined *this.* There, leaning over the edge of the deck and staring down at us with a sightless, featureless manacle head, stood a bossling. The overgrown fetterling, five times as big and ten times as vicious as the smaller, more common iron monsters, was a fearsome creature. I mean, four of them had succeeded in restraining the sky god at one point.

But even scarier—it was *speaking.*

*"*Are our stories being told?" the Maafa asked through the bossling. It was weird talking to a ship via its surrogate mouth, a giant iron monster. Then again, it was weird talking to a ship at all. So…

I squared my shoulders and put one foot back in a boxing stance. It gave me balance and stability and made me feel a bit more secure. I glared at the giant iron monster and spoke with a confidence I didn't totally feel. "I have told your story many times. In this world and beyond."

The bossling tilted its head. "You kept your word. We are impressed." "You didn't think I would?"

"Recent events have left us…displeased."

That felt like an understatement. I could feel the hatred rolling off the ship in waves. Scuttling and skittering noises came from inside the giant hole, a maw of evil that looked ready to devour us, raft and all. I had to get my questions answered and skedaddle out of there.

"I'm sorry for whatever happened, but I have a question for you," I said.

Before I could continue, the bossling rattled menacingly, the sound of its chains dragging on the deck earsplitting. The iron monster screeched, and to my horror, answering calls emerged from inside the Maafa. There were more of them.

"YOU DO NOT GET TO DEMAND ANSWERS FROM US!" the Maafa/bossling roared. "There was a bargain. You struck an agreement with us. The Anansesem tells our story, and we return to our slumber."

I nodded. "Yes, that was the deal. So—"

"So tell us why our sleep was disturbed, our resting spot ripped apart and looted? Your agents of betrayal, with the disgusting tools of your gods, entered *our* domain and took things that did not belong to them. Is the deal off, Anansesem? Shall our children return to punish those on land?"

The sound of hundreds of chains rattled in the darkness within the Maafa. A fetid smell, like swamp water and burning metal, rolled out of the submerged holds and nearly made me gag.

“No! The deal is still on. I am telling your story. And I don’t know who __”

I stopped, midsentence and mid-cough. I *did* know who. The Maafa had just confirmed my worst fear.

“The one who took from you,” I said. “What did he take? Did he…did he rescue King Cotton?”

The rattling stopped all at once. On the top deck, the bossling gave a final shriek and fell apart into a hundred fist-size chain links. I waited. This was a familiar routine. Sure enough, from inside the jagged maw of the Maafa came another set of heavy footsteps. A knotted wooden creature pressed forward, the light of dawn just falling across the monster’s face.

A hullbeast.

When it spoke, I could hear the buzzing undertone of brand flies waiting to be belched forth and unleashed on its prey.

“The poisoned one’s body,” the monster rasped, “was not taken. His limbs were ripped apart by the currents, the bolls of his flesh churned in the burning water of our home until they burned to ash. No, that body could not be taken anywhere.”

I sighed. That was a relief. Bear must’ve just salvaged parts of iron monsters from the sea floor to build his magic armor. Okay. I could deal with that. Defeating him would still be tough, but if they worked together, the gods of MidPass and Alke could—

“But…” continued the Maafa.

I froze as hundreds of fetterlings crept around the hullbeast, rimming the hole in the Maafa’s hull like hungry fledglings waiting for their parent to bring them dinner.

I refused to be on the menu.

“But what?” I asked, shooting a glance at Ayanna. She gripped her staff, ready to zoom us away.

“But the angry one did take
something.” The angry one. Bear.

More fetterlings began to cover every available surface on the Maafa. They leaned over the top deck, slithered around the broken mast, and clung to the tattered sails like rusted leeches. Gum Baby, unusually silent up to this point, tugged on my shorts leg.

“Gum Baby ain’t afraid of nothin’, don’t misunderstand, but Gum Baby forgot to bring her beat-down boots.”

“You don’t wear boots,” I whispered back.

“Because Gum Baby forgot them. Now seems like a good time to go look for them.”

Ayanna glanced around nervously. “I agree with Gum Baby. Let’s get out of here.”

“Sounds wise to me,” Anansi whispered.

The ship rumbled ominously. I stood and shouted, “What did Bear take?”

“Oh, we think you already know what it is. You just want someone else to speak it out loud, to take on the responsibility you so desperately try to avoid. It makes no difference to us. After we swallow you and the spider god whole, we will crawl forth from the sea again to the burned ruins of the angry one’s lair and consume him as well.”

“What did he take?” I shouted again.

“The mask of King Cotton.”

Those five words didn’t fade away. Instead, they combined with the thunder of the approaching storm and the howling wind. The Maafa suddenly lurched forward, spilling iron monsters over the sides like rats jumping out of a sinking ship. I’d been waiting for something like that—you don’t enter the presence of evil and not expect to be betrayed—but still, the speed at which the fetterlings attacked nearly overwhelmed us.

Ayanna yanked her staff to the left, sending us swerving forward— straight into the Maafa’s damaged hull. I don’t think any of us expected that, not even Anansi or Gum Baby.

“Ayannaaaaa!”

The raft dodged monster after monster. We ducked around tight corners, just barely avoiding leaping fetterlings and a massive swing of two of the hullbeast’s four arms. Forward, into the darkness, into the damp rotten stench. We rocked left and right, the terrifying moans of the Maafa raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

At last I saw where Ayanna was taking us. An opening in the ceiling of the hold, and the deck beyond, and the freedom that was the morning sky. She angled the raft upward and I scooped up the SBP as it slid down the raft toward me.

“Hang on!” I shouted to Gum Baby, only to look back to see her firing sap balls at fetterlings that got too close.

“Sap attack!”

“You ain’t got the reach!”

“Triple sap attack!”

We shot out into the air as the Maafa began to crumble around us. Fiery waves seemed to reach out, barely missing the raft by inches. Once we were about fifty feet in the air, we slowed and floated, watching as the ancient slave ship sank beneath the Burning Sea for the second time. My lungs were aching, and I realized I’d been holding my breath. Exhaling shakily, I collapsed to the floor of the raft and sat with my head in my hands.

“We made it,” Anansi said, his muffled voice coming from my shirt pocket.

“Some help you were,” I muttered.

“So what now?” Ayanna asked.

I didn’t answer. Not at first.

*The mask of King Cotton.*

In our battle with the evil haint, Gum Baby had unleashed a furious barrage of sap attacks against King Cotton. The sticky amber stuff had covered King Cotton’s head in a lumpy resin, and it had formed a mask. That’s all that was left of him when the rest of his body drifted away, and that’s what Bear had found at the bottom of the Burning Sea. While stealing iron-monster parts from the Maafa for his armor, he must’ve stumbled across the relic.

But I remembered the first time I’d seen the haint.

He was a slinking, oily shadow that had escaped from a bottle on the Bottle Tree.

And now that shadow was trapped in the amber mask.

King Cotton had gotten his hooks into Bear.

# 28
# SHADOWS OF GREATNESS

**THE ENCHANTED RAFT FLOATED ABOVE A BURNING SEA, MIDWAY** between a coastal city of golden splendor and an abandoned smoking ruin of an island. On that raft sat a doll covered in sticky gum-tree sap, a magical phone with a trickster god trapped inside, and two exhausted rising eighth graders. At least, I think Ayanna would be in eighth grade. Did Alke have middle schools? Regardless, two worlds depended on their next move.

"Tristan, why are you talking in the third person?"

Anansi's question pulled me from my thoughts. I looked around. Gum Baby was shaking her head as she watched me, and the spider god peered out of the phone, a look of concern on his face. Ayanna had one eyebrow raised. Had I been speaking out loud without realizing it?

"What?" I asked.

"You were mumbling to yourself again," Gum Baby said. "And Gum Baby *know* she didn't hear somethin' about a doll." The glare she fixed me with could've started a fire.

I shook my head quickly. "No, of course not. I must've…I must've sneezed. That's it. I have weird sneezes. They're more like cough-sneezes, so they can sound like words. I guess."

She looked slightly appeased, and I hurriedly turned back to Anansi, who had opened up another app on the SBP. It was Alke Maps, one of the first applications I'd seen when Nyame converted the Story Box into a phone. It was supposed to show every region in Alke. I studied it along with

Ayanna. Gum Baby scrambled up onto my shoulder and peered down as well.

"So," Anansi said from the corner of the screen. "We need a plan."

I nodded and waited, but the spider god just kept looking at me expectantly. My jaw dropped. "You want *me* to come up with a plan? What about you? You're the god—can't you do something?"

"What, from my advantageous position inside this silly device? Sorry, my boy, but you've got to take the lead on this one. And everyone's counting on you, so, you know…no pressure." He flashed his easy smile, and I glared at him. He was enjoying this.

But maybe he was right. Oh, I'm sure he had some grand design, some scheme he was cooking up. At the moment, though, I couldn't see what it was. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do except offer advice if I decided to confront Bear again. And…to be honest, I wasn't sure I was ready to do that quite yet. The knowledge that King Cotton was out and about—even if he was trapped in a sap mask—terrified me to the core.

I pushed the fear aside and tried to concentrate. *Think, Tristan, think.*

"Bear wants to go beyond punching a hole in the sky," I said slowly. "He said he wants to make it so no one, not haints or people or creatures or anything, could slip between the worlds again. But what does that mean? Is he out to destroy the tools of the gods, like John Henry's hammer?"

Anansi shook his head from his perch in the top corner of the SBP's screen. "Destroying a god's symbol, their essence, requires a massive amount of power and strength, and even Bear isn't that strong. No, he has to be doing something with them."

"And why kidnap Tristan's grandma and Mami Wata?" asked Ayanna. "Just to make us upset?"

The question hung in the air as the four of us thought about it. Well, Anansi, Ayanna, and I thought about it. Gum Baby had scrambled down from my shoulders and was hurling sap balls at the Burning Sea, watching little puffs of flame shoot up from the water's surface. I was tempted to nudge her off the raft to see what would happen, but I didn't. It was just a thought! I would never….

Anyway.

I sighed. "Whatever his plans are, we need to stop them, and that means finding where Bear has hidden Nana and Mami Wata. They could be

anywhere. An abandoned palace in the Golden Crescent…Maybe in the foothills before we get to the Ridgefolk's territory…Anywhere!"

Anansi nodded. "We have to be strategic. Narrow down the possibilities and be smart about where we go and in what order."

That made sense. I tried to think while keeping an eye on Gum Baby, who was making bigger and bigger sap balls to generate larger flames on the sea surface. As I watched, the tiny terror rolled a sap ball as large as a melon, taking great care to make sure it didn't stick to the raft. She lifted it above her head, ready to cast it down as the ultimate sacrifice, when something wormed its way from the back of my mind and punched its way clear to the front.

*Flames.*

*Burning.*

"Sweet peaches!" I said. "I know where to go!"

"Where?" Anansi demanded. Gum Baby tried to turn around to face us, but the unwieldy sap ball plunged to the sea below, landing with a large splash that sent up a blazing curtain of fire before it quickly subsided.

"You better say something useful," Gum Baby said angrily. "Makin' Gum Baby waste a perfectly good sap balloon…"

I started to continue, then paused. "Um…sap balloon?"

"Did Gum Baby stutter? Larger than a sap ball and with seven times as much sap. Rebelutionary."

"You mean *revolutionary*."

"Gum Baby knows what she means! Sap balloons are going to change the game forever."

"What game?" Anansi asked, unable to help himself.

"The sap game. But Gum Baby wouldn't expect y'all dunderheads to understand. Big rebelutionary things are going on over here."

I looked between her and the replacement sap balloon she was trying to make. "Sure…okay. As I was saying, I know where to go. The Maafa basically told us. Remember? It said the angry one lived in the burned ruins of a lair. Well, where is the one place we know Bear had family ties, is currently a burned-out shell, and everyone was specifically warned to stay away from?"

Gum Baby, Ayanna, and Anansi stared at me like I had sprouted wings from my forehead. "Now, what are *you* babbling about?" the spider god said.

“Told you he was a Bumbletongue,” Gum Baby muttered.

I shook my head, then scooted back to the rear of the flying raft and grabbed the rudder. “Laugh it up now. You’ll see.”

“Fine,” Anansi said. “Where is Bear’s

hideout?” I grinned. “MidPass.”

MidPass.

I’d been to the island the folk heroes had called home, but I’d never seen it in its days of splendor. Before the carnage and wreckage. Before the terror and the lockdowns. My feelings of fear and failure were all I could remember about the place, and that fact made me sadder than expected.

I shrugged off my backpack and unzipped it. Inside, Nana’s quilt pieces glowed faintly in the light of day. I pulled out a square, a warm orange-and-gold section with swaying fields of corn on it.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered.

Ayanna kept one eye on her steering and the other on me. “What are you doing now?”

“Chestnutt told me I could track my grandmother by using the Story Box with things associated with her. The memories and stories she put into this quilt of hers should do the trick.” I held the fragment up to the SBP, a little unsure of what to do next, but a smile crossed my face as text crawled across the screen in gold letters:

*New stories found.*
*Adding to database.*
*Author located. Plot route?*

I tapped the acknowledgment button that appeared, and like some sort of magical GPS, the main screen of Alke Maps returned, this time with a glittering golden route guiding us forward.

“There we go,” I said, holding up the phone so Ayanna could see.

As the raft sliced through the sky toward MidPass, I couldn’t help but scan the sea below for bone ships. Somewhere down there was the exact spot Gum Baby and I had splashed into when we’d fallen through the hole in the sky. I still remembered the nightmarish sensation of falling forever, followed by the actual nightmare of the haunted skeleton boats.

Now the seas were calm—barely a flame sprinkled atop the surface. It felt…ordinary.

That was a good thing, right?

"Look," Gum Baby whispered.

The ruined island loomed out of a fog bank so gray it looked like a shield of smoke. Ayanna brought the raft lower and we skimmed over the tops of waves. Trees began to loom out of the distance, and I tried not to shudder. The Drowned Forest. Me and Ayanna and Gum Baby and Fox and the other Midfolk had fled through the soggy woods, desperately trying to escape the fetterlings chasing us. Trying, and failing.

"Gum Baby don't like seeing it like this." The small voice came from behind me, where the little doll had sat down crisscross applesauce and looked over the back of the raft as Ayanna steered. "It's so…empty."

"What was it like before?" I asked.

It was Ayanna who answered. "Before the iron monsters? It was loud. Good loud, not bad loud. Voices filled the air. You could hear laughter all over the island. Smell food cooking. See everybody playing. It was happy."

She fell into silence, and I didn't try to nudge her out of it. Truth was, I knew exactly what she meant. Some places just have that vibe. The feeling of good times tucked into nooks and crannies, spilling out of windows and doors. Chances are you know a place just like that. When you think of it, a smile crosses your face and memories appear like hidden treasures suddenly found.

That's how my grandparents' house had felt these past few weeks.

"Tristan, is that—?" Anansi's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I held up the SBP, camera lens pointed out, so the spider god could see. Anansi alternated his gaze from the map to the world outside, looking at something off to the left. At first I didn't recognize it—that's how bad a toll the fire had taken. I just saw a lumpy mass as large as a building, with a tower emerging from its center.

Then it hit me.

"Oh no," I whispered.

A sharp gasp was all that came from Ayanna.

It was the Thicket. Or what remained of it. Low-hanging clouds hid much of it. And as we drew closer, the wind began to pick up, rocking the raft and making my stomach do flip-flops. We didn't have much time. The cooling temperature, the angry clouds—a storm was on its way.

We flew into a large clearing roughly the size of three football fields. The Drowned Forest had given way to scorched barren earth, still smoking in parts. Nothing grew. No animals moved. No birds flew in the sky above. The silence felt heavy, like a mass of soggy blankets, and it smelled… wrong.

The state of the Thicket squeezed my heart, and I felt tears prickle at the corner of my eyes. What used to be a beautiful and natural sloping tangle of woody vines, delicate flowers, and dangerous thorns—woven together into protective walls that sheltered an entire community—was now a black spiderweb of soot and ashes. Every so often a thin breeze would move harshly through the clearing, and the remnants of the magical epicenter of MidPass would rattle like bones.

*Ticka ticka tickety ticka*

But the most horrible sight protruded from the center of it all.

"Not too close," Anansi warned. His face was grim. Ayanna was biting her lower lip, and Gum Baby had gone ashen and silent. I watched them—the trickster god who'd come here in disguise, the girl who'd worked harder than anyone to save the people she loved, and the sap-covered doll who'd called this place home her whole life. Their faces were mirrors of my own, I was sure, as I turned back to confront the horror before us once more.

The Tree of Power stood out of the ruins of the Thicket, shattered.

And that was where the GPS route ended.

The top half of the tree was gone. Just gone. No canopy, no branches, just a splintered trunk that still towered over everything. A shadow of its former self. Its blackened tips looked like a ruined crown, hung on a spear planted in the ground where a beloved monarch had fallen.

And maybe it had.

But even that wasn't the worst part.

Greenish-white lines crisscrossed the trunk like veins of poison, and every so often they pulsed with a weird light. Thick clouds billowed out of the top, filling the sky.

I turned and stared at the horizon, at the storm that marched from MidPass ever closer to the Golden Crescent and the rest of Alke. The clouds were the same sickly greenish-gray color as what was leaking out of the destroyed Tree of Power. On a hunch, I pressed the adinkra flush against my wrist. Gum Baby turned around quickly at my hiss of pain.

"What is it?" she asked.

I stared at the tree as Ayanna pulled the rudder of the raft forward so we drifted closer. Those veins…they couldn't be. Could they?

"Tristan," Anansi said. "What are you seeing, my boy?"

I pointed at the ruined Tree of Power and took a deep shuddering breath. "That storm…it isn't natural. I think something in the ruined old tree is creating it."

Ayanna looked incredulous. "That's where you said your grandmother and Mami Wata are being kept!"

"Yeah. And I think I know why Bear collected all the remnants of the iron monsters. He needed chains powerful enough to restrain a god, just like the bosslings and the brand flies did to Nyame. And I'm starting to think…"

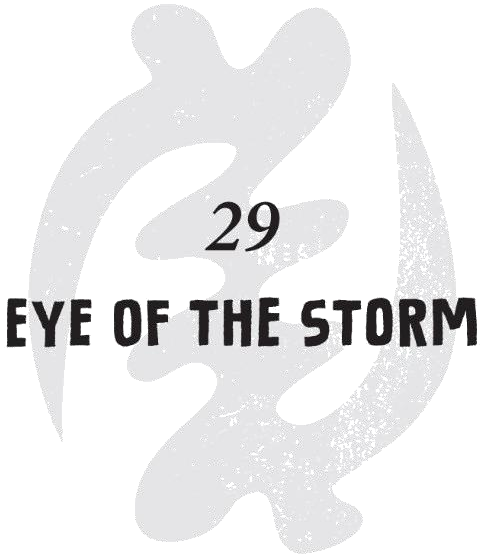
Gum Baby frowned. "What do you

mean?" "Let me show you."

I nodded at Ayanna. The raft picked up speed and Anansi looked worried. "Are you sure it's safe? What if Bear returns? I can't do anything to help you. You three will be on your own."

But I shook my head. Something had fallen into place, a puzzle piece I didn't even know was missing, and its addition completely changed the rules of the game. I didn't understand everything that was happening, but I knew one thing for sure. The storm, the kidnappings—they were all connected.

And if I didn't do something soon, both Alke and my world would pay, and pay dearly.



# 29
# EYE OF THE STORM

**AYANNA GUIDED THE RAFT TOWARD THE CORRUPTED TREE OF** Power.

"How do we get inside?" Gum Baby whispered. She'd scrambled back to her perch on my shoulder and was currently gripping my hair. I was going to have to wash and rewash it for days to get the sap out. But I wasn't going to call her on it now. We were all frightened. Even Anansi looked shaken.

Because those weren't veins running up and down and around the trunk.

They were fetterlings, linked together like some horrible necklace. Or collar. Pulsing green as they choked the remaining life out of the magical tree. Bear had turned an area where the Midfolk had flourished into a prison.

Ayanna guided the raft carefully between the black tips of the trunk and dove into its hollowed-out middle, which was just wide enough for us to fit through. Darkness swallowed us, and I nearly panicked. Then the SBP flickered and the screen brightened.

"Here," Anansi said. He pointed at the bottom of the screen, where another app icon was materializing. "I thought you might need this."

I stared at the app's name: This Little Light. That sounded eerily close to a song Nana used to sing. The rounded square was navy blue with a yellow lantern icon glimmering in the middle. I tapped it, then gasped as light *unfolded* from the phone like origami made of moonbeams. It bathed the raft and everything inside the Tree of Power.

Including a figure slumped over at the very bottom of the chamber.

My heart skipped a beat.

"Nana," I whispered.

Ayanna, sensing the urgency, dropped us down in a tight spiral, ducking cobwebs and slipping around the moldy remains of the interior. The faint sound of a drumbeat danced in and out of my range of hearing, so I thought I could've imagined it. It sounded wrong. Offbeat.

As we dropped, the air grew thicker and staler, with the faint hint of a metallic tang, and the silver light of the SBP sent the shadows retreating. At last the raft hit the floor with a bump. I swallowed, then took a slow step forward, holding out the phone as I tried to figure out what I was seeing in front of me.

A rotted trough, roughly the size of a bathtub, sat in the middle of the damp, lumpy ground, holding a figure on a wooden stool. I couldn't tell if the figure was breathing. I couldn't tell if…

My foot kicked a clump of dirt and sent it skittering across the ground.

The figure sat up.

"Nana?" But as soon as I lifted the glowing phone clutched tightly in my hand, I knew I had the wrong person. In fact, it wasn't a person at all. No person I knew had shimmering blue-green dreadlocks that floated and swayed in midair as if in water. No person I knew had an iridescent shimmer on their dark brown skin like sunlight reflecting off a still lake. No.

This was a goddess.

I stood there for several seconds, confused. What had happened? The silly GPS was supposed to have led me to Nana. I took another step forward, and her head lifted, freezing me in my tracks.

"Mami Wata?" I called softly.

The question seemed to slip through the fog clouding her eyes, and the goddess of the rivers and lakes raised her chin so that her eyes could latch on to mine. Then, as if that effort had tired her, her head dropped and her eyes closed.

Wait.

I peeked over the edge of the rotted trough, then recoiled. There was a pool of water at the bottom—a disgusting gray soup of fetterling chain links, brand-fly wings, and something lumpy that I didn't look at too closely. Mami Wata's feet and ankles were submerged in the glop.

“They’re poisoning her,” Anansi said. His voice was thick with disgust. “Poison?”

“Like the brand flies on Nyame,” Gum Baby added. She hopped up onto the lip of the makeshift tub and shook her head. “Just nasty.”

“Mami Wata is a water goddess,” Ayanna said. “She is one with Alke’s different bodies of water and cares for them. By forcing her to take a footbath in iron-monster stew, Bear’s keeping her too weak to use her powers.”

“Even worse, the corrupted Tree of Power is sending this filth into the sky, poisoning the air.” Anansi wore a grim expression. “It seems Bear has learned a lot of horrible things.”

“The storm…” I said, my heart skipping a beat. “Bear’s using Mami Wata to create it. When it hits Alke—”

“It’ll destroy everything we’re trying to rebuild,” Ayanna finished. She shook her head. “We can’t let that happen.”

No, we couldn’t. I rolled up my sleeves and gripped the side of the trough. It felt slimy and cold, and I tried not to shudder at the clammy sensation. “Okay, enough talking. Let’s free her.”

“Tristan, wait—” Anansi began, but it was too late. I heaved at the old wood, and it creaked stubbornly before a large chunk of the side ripped away in my hands. I fell back on the seat of my shorts, then scrambled aside as water began to spill out. First it trickled, then it gushed, splashing onto the ground and sending its rusty metal contents everywhere.

An ominous rumble echoed from somewhere near the top of the tree. “Uh…” Gum Baby said. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said, standing and wiping myself off.

“You did something. You’re always doing something. Gum Baby thinks you need to start sitting down and learning to do nothing. Study it. Become an expert at doing nothing.”

“First of all—”

Ayanna interrupted me. “Would you two please focus so we can avoid dying?”

We both glared at her, but at that moment another rumble sounded, and a piece of rotted bark the size of a surfboard hurtled through the air and landed like a spear in the ground next to me. Gum Baby and I stared at it, then at each other, then back at it.

“You know, not dying is good,” I said.

“Gum Baby was just thinking that.”

Something clanked in the nearly empty tub. A longer piece of fetterling chain had become entangled around Mami Wata’s foot. I tiptoed across the soggy ground and leaned into the trough to try to slip it off. The metal was cold. Bitter cold. More rumbles filled the dark space above our heads, as if the Tree of Power were expressing its pain from everything it had been through. Finally I managed to pull the snarled chain from around Mami Wata, and I tossed it to the other side of the tree. I stood, only to see two glints of light several inches from my face. Her eyes had opened. She was watching me.

With lightning quickness she lunged forward, her hair floating above her head and her face twisted into a grimace as she snagged my arm and yanked me close.

“You’re too late,” she whispered, just as the Tree of Power began to splinter apart. But instead of falling, the fragments remained suspended in midair as the world froze around me.

# 30
# FREE MAMI WATA

**MANY THINGS CAN BE TRUE AT THE SAME TIME.**

I've heard that said several times by different people—Dad, Mom, even a few teachers. Loving reading and disliking the books I was given to read. Being hungry and not wanting to eat what was on my plate. The sun still shining bright in the sky and yet it's time for bed. (Thanks a lot, daylight saving time. Spring forward into the trash, why don't you.)

But never was that statement more real for me than when Mami Wata held my gaze for those few seconds. We were standing still and yet traveling everywhere at the same time.

One moment we were in the dead Tree of Power in MidPass, and the next we stood high on a grassy hill overlooking a mighty river as wide as a freeway, the roaring waters carrying canoes filled with brown-skinned families. Children waved and parents lifted their hands to honor the goddess on the bank, sometimes even floating gifts toward her that collected in the shallows.

Then we were sitting in a turquoise grotto behind a massive waterfall, the sound of it thundering through the mist. A group of girls sat on rocks nearby, laughing and talking as they braided each other's hair, sharpened spears, and made plans. Every so often one of them would stand, turn, and salute Mami Wata with a raised spear, the same kind of weapon I'd seen in Nyanza, with a long narrow blade at the top and rope tied to the shaft.

My eyes widened as I recognized Ninah, the river spirit who'd first warned us about Bear coming. That felt like years ago. Now she looked up,

caught my eyes, and lifted a spear in greeting. I started to raise my hand, but the world went dark.

When sunlight returned, Mami Wata and I were floating above Nyanza. Not as I'd seen it with Ayanna and Junior and Gum Baby before, but as it was supposed to exist—a giant lake surrounded by several smaller ones, connected by a network of streams and floating bridges. People swam and played, fished, planted water crops, and lived their lives to the fullest.

"It is as it should be," a warm, musical voice said.

When I turned, the goddess was looking at me. Her long blue-green dreadlocks floated behind her as if we were underwater, and her eyes were as hard and black as the stones Junior threw. Seeing them made me think about the boy's sacrifice for my sake, and I looked away.

"You are worried about someone." It was a statement, not a question. When I nodded, she turned and stared out over the people living their lives below. Her people. Mami Wata stretched out her arms. "You are right to be. I am worried about everyone. What you are seeing is how it should be, but not how it is."

I frowned. "Yeah, the lakes are dry back in Nyanza. Everyone is scared, and no one knows what's going on. What happened?"

"You've seen my condition. I am the goddess of the waters. All waters. My rage is that of the Burning Sea, and my tears are the waterfalls in the Golden Crescent. I am tied to them all, and they are tied to me. My people, who carried me in their hearts while floating on my waters, have taken me across Alke."

There it was again, the concept of people carrying something from one place and taking it with them all over the land. Diaspora. All connected by origin. I remembered Chestnutt saying that Mami Wata was the source of Nyanza. I saw that now.

"So, if you're being poisoned," I said slowly, "then so is every water source in Alke. Or they would've been, if you hadn't cut off the tap. And that's why Old Man River was complaining to Keelboat Annie. You're connected."

"We are all connected. What Bear has done threatens all of Alke…and beyond." The hard black eyes turned on me again. "He knows not the implications if he continues."

"He's being controlled," I said. "By an evil haint."

“The seeds of hate can only sprout in fertile ground. Do not rush to blame all of this on the haint. But symptoms care not about who administered the poison. If the storm spreads, it will seep into the very fabric of this world and also into yours. It will corrupt all the stories, breaking them into fragments to be spread far apart and never heard again.”

John Henry’s condition flashed into my mind, and a chill wrapped around my spine. “We can’t let that happen!”

Mami Wata nodded. “We cannot. But someone must step up. I kept this fragment of myself isolated from my corporal presence just in case help arrived. You *must* get me back to the Golden Crescent. Only there, with all the gods and goddesses of Alke present, can we stop the storm.”

The picturesque scene of Nyanza flickered, then began to fade. I panicked.

“Wait!” I said. “How do I—?”

But she disappeared, along with the rest of the world, and I was left in darkness.

I blinked, and the Tree of Power was collapsing around us.

Mami Wata’s grip held me in place.

We had to get out of there, and fast. But still the goddess of the waters held me tight, her deep black eyes boring into mine as if I were the one responsible for imprisoning her.

Which…you know, wasn’t good.

“Uh, this ain’t the time for a staring contest,” Gum Baby said. Ayanna already had the raft floating several inches off the ground, and Gum Baby had hopped on with the SBP in her arms. Anansi looked warily at the sticky hands slipping closer to the screen but opted to remain quiet since he was being saved. “Get on the good foot, Bumbletongue! Whichever one that is.”

“Mami Wata, we need to go.” I gently tugged her arm and the goddess shook herself out of her daze.

“Our world is ripping apart at the seams,” she said, her words thick and full of pain. As if echoing her thoughts, the rotted baobab tree we stood inside groaned again, a thunderous sound that tried to shake my skin off my bones.

I slipped my shoulder beneath the goddess’s arm and she leaned against me. She smelled like lemongrass growing alongside a stream. “And who…might you be?” she asked between gasps of pain. Really? I’d just talked to

her—or some version of her. But before I could answer, a giant root as wide as a minivan ripped free of the earth, spraying clods of dirt everywhere.

"My hair!" Gum Baby wailed.

Despite everything, I laughed. "Really? You're worried about your hair at a time like this?"

"Some of us take pride in looking good." Gum Baby sniffed. "Not like you'd know anything about that."

"Hey!"

"Let's go!" Ayanna shouted.

Mami Wata and I stumbled forward and collapsed on the sturdy magical craft.

"Hold on!" Ayanna cried. She tried to take off, but the giant root had been joined by a second. And a third. I shook my head in disbelief. They were like sea serpents freed from a prison of mud and rock. Tiny fibers covered them all, soil and pebbles tangled in knots. The giant roots wavered in midair like…

A familiar pain started to throb against my left wrist.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. It couldn't be…Could it?

The tips of the roots had an eerie green glow, and I groaned. "For once in my life, can't things be easy?"

The raft tried to climb, but the roots were too quick, batting us out the air like gnats. We went spinning toward the ground, only just managing not to crash by the skin of our teeth. Well, my teeth, at least. Did spiders and animated dolls have teeth? Maybe if—

"Boy!"

Mami Wata's voice alternated between the soft babble of a creek and the rushing thunder of river rapids. She stood on the raft, wobbling a bit. The hem of her dress billowed softly behind her calves, rising and falling in waves, almost like the tail of a river dolphin swimming upstream. "The tree has been corrupted. We must—"

The largest of the roots hammered down on the ground next to us, barely missing crushing me like a roach. It was inches away, and I finally got a good look at the peeved appendage.

"Oh no," I muttered.

Thick chains choked the root, their rusty metal glowing the sickly green of the iron monsters. Even worse, wiggling bumps that oozed greenish-black liquid covered the poisoned tree. It smelled awful, like socks that

haven’t been washed in two months. You know the kind—the ones so stiff they can stand up on their own.

Blech.

I started to clench my fist, ready to use the adinkra bracelet to fight, then stopped. Not because of the pain—I could tolerate that now. But then why? What was I going to do, punch a tree? I’d done that once before, to disastrous results. Had throwing myself at Reggie worked? Had attacking Bear head-on worked? No, it hadn’t.

*We have to be strategic*, Anansi had said.

Okay, then.

If Bear could steal the weapons of other gods to become more powerful, there was no reason I couldn’t give their symbols to one of their own who needed them.

The giant root lifted into the air to join its two other partners in grime. I stood up as tall as I could and glanced at the river goddess. “How powerful are the waters you control? Will they do what you say?”

Mami Wata’s gaze swept the hollowed tree, taking in the poisoned roots hovering menacingly above the ground, the raft, and finally, the three of us. She studied Gum Baby, narrowed her eyes at the SBP in the doll’s hands, and then focused on me. “Never question the power of a goddess, little one.”

*CRASH!*

Another sharp splinter of bark fell through the dark to land just outside the SBP’s light. I licked my lips and edged to the middle of the raft. Things were getting hairy in here, and I’d just about had my fill of close shaves.

“I’m here to help,” I said. “My grandmother needs me. Alke needs me, even if it doesn’t know it yet. But right now, I need you.”

“The last time someone told me they were here to help, they poisoned my rivers, destroyed my streams, and locked me in a dying tree whose cries of pains were the only thing I heard for days!” Mami Wata glared at me, and when a god or goddess glares at you, you don’t mess around. It’s worse than that look your parents give you when you’re cutting up in public and they’re silently letting you know that it’s on once y’all get back to the car.

The raft jerked to the left, and the smallest of the root trio slammed into the dirt where we’d been just moments before.

“Do something!” Gum Baby shouted.

“Trust me,” I said to Mami Wata, putting as much honesty into my voice as I could muster.

I pulled the adinkra bracelet off my wrist and held it out for her to inspect. Her eyes widened, then met my own. After a second that felt like an eternity, she nodded. I slipped the bracelet over her hand and she stiffened. Her hair began to sparkle. The brown skin of her arms began to gleam, and her dress whipped left and right around her ankles, as if she were standing in a current.

“I was born in the shallows of a mighty river,” she whispered.

I grinned, despite everything. Despite the roots now constricting the raft like a giant python. Despite Nana not being here. Despite my hardly ever winning a fight. I knew this story. It was embroidered on the ruined quilt in my backpack.

“Or in the maelstrom of the sea,” I said, speaking the next line. “Or in the hurricane.”

“Or in the lakes of the people.”

“I am Mami Wata,” the goddess said, her words a tide that would sweep aside all who stood before her.

My hand found hers and we spoke the final words together. “And this is my power!”

But when my voice ended, Mami Wata’s rose. It was a slowly building roar, like a swollen river rushing down a mountain, not yet visible but terrifying in its approach. The ground trembled as she spoke. A fissure appeared in the earth just below the raft, the crack racing around us as if an invisible knife were stabbing through the dirt and trying to carve away our existence.

*CRACK!*

The roots reeled backward like wounded dragons as the earth trembled. The Tree of Power shuddered. With an agonizing rumble and a terrible groan, like it could no longer suffer the torture Bear had inflicted upon it, the evil role it was forced to play in betraying one of its own, the magical old baobab fell in on itself in a devastating avalanche of shattered bark. A dark cloud descended, a last-ditch effort of the poison desperate to smother us. This was it. I cringed, ducking and covering my head with a yelp while Gum Baby and Anansi shouted in fear.

*FWOOM!*

The ground shifted again and droplets of water misted the side of my face and my arms. I stood for a second, two, three, before realizing that I wasn't being crushed. I hadn't felt so much as a splinter. I opened my eyes, confused, then gasped.

The Tree of Power was gone.

Like it had never existed.

In its place, a fountain of water had erupted out of the earth in a perfect circle around us, rising into the air and arcing overhead to fall to the ground nearly a dozen yards away. Where the tree's canopy had been, there was now a foaming white spray, the leaves replaced by water droplets the size of my fist that fell to the ground so slowly they were like tears trickling down an invisible face. The storm clouds sped away until nothing blocked our view of the sky. We stood inside a shimmering blue cylinder, like a column of glass, a waterfall in reverse. (A water-rise?)

Mami Wata was in the center, her face upturned. Gum Baby scrambled over to me, climbing up to her familiar perch atop my shoulder to get a better view. She handed me the SBP, and I was so entranced by what was happening that I didn't even grimace at the sticky residue smeared all over the screen.

Even Anansi had been struck speechless by the goddess. That was impressive.

"What's Water Granny doing?" Gum Baby whispered.

Mami Wata stepped up to the wall of water and plunged her fingertips into it. Then she began to walk through, slowly, while tracing her fingers along the glimmering surface and humming softly to herself.

"Sweet peaches," I murmured.

"Oh my goodness," Ayanna said.

Gum Baby just shook her head, tiny droplets of sap splattering my shoulder, and Anansi stared thoughtfully.

Silver words appeared out of the ripples left in the wake of the river goddess's fingers. Shining cursive letters traced their way up through the wall of water in a spiral. I twirled around, awestruck. The words we'd just spoken, the beginning of one of Nana's many stories about the water goddess, floated in front of us.

The circle of water dropped so we could fly the raft out of it. As soon as we did, a geyser surged out of the earth where the Tree of Power had been.

“Now, then,” Mami Wata said, wringing out her hair and eyeing the three of us in turn. “United we stand, hmm?”

I stepped forward on the raft and pulled her up. “Yes, ma’am.” From my backpack I fished out the section of the quilt we’d used to guide us here. Parts of the words we’d just spoken still glimmered on the fabric. I shook my head. “I just don’t get it. The SBP—I mean, the Story Box—was supposed to lead me to Nana.”

“May I?”

I handed over the slightly soaked square to Mami Wata. She smiled as she examined it, rubbing the fabric between her thumb and forefinger.

“This is the story I told her.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

The goddess pursed her lips and handed the square back to me. Then, out of thin air, she produced a ribbon that looked suspiciously like seaweed and put her locs up in an elaborate bun. When she was finished, she placed both hands on her hips and cocked her head, looking just like Nana always did when she’d come to an important decision.

“I told your grandmother this story many years ago when she came to visit.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised by that statement, but it hit me like an uppercut. Then I recalled my conversation with Nana in her bedroom. She’d been to Alke, and I’d never had the chance to talk to her about it.

I pulled out several more tattered pieces of quilt, sorting them as I searched for the squares with writing on them, holding up one after another as I found them. “Do you recognize these? Did anyone else from here tell her stories?”

“Hmm.” The river goddess tapped an aquamarine nail on her chin as she thought, before shrugging. “Two others that I know of. Their stories appear on those scraps you’ve got there. The boo hag from the foothills…”

“Lady Night?” I asked.

“And the loud woman who talks to one of my oldest rivers…” “Keelboat Annie!” Ayanna said. Wow, Nana had a pretty nice squad.

“Yes,” said Mami Wata. “The four of us got together one time and—”

“I hate to interrupt,” Anansi said, “but could you hold this fond reunion some other time, when we’re not surrounded by death and decay?”

I swallowed the hundreds of questions threatening to spill out of my mouth and nodded.

"So the SBP tracked you down with the quilt," I said to Mami Wata, "because you are one of the authors who contributed to it. So even if we tried again, it might not take us directly to Nana. We're going to have to do this the hard way."

"Charge in headfirst like a blunder-head?" Gum Baby asked.

"Ignore the advice of those wiser than you and punch the first thing that moves?" Anansi asked.

"Beg someone flyer than you to save you?" Ayanna asked.

Mami Wata pursed her lips but thankfully didn't join in.

"NO," I said between gritted teeth, my neck flushing hot. "We need to find the other storytellers first."

"But Lady Night might be…gone," said Ayanna. "We don't know what happened to…people after we left."

By *people*, I knew she meant Junior, too, but she didn't want to say his name in front of Anansi.

My heart ached, but my voice was firm. "We don't know for sure, and until we do, they're still alive. If we can gather her and Keelboat Annie, then maybe…"

Anansi rubbed his chin with two of his six hands. "And, if you'll pardon my skepticism, just how do you plan on stopping Bear and the storm he is nearly ready to unleash? We don't even know where he is."

I grinned a fierce, toothy grin that was more feral than friendly.

"Oh yes we do," I said. "He'll be wherever Nana is. I know why Bear kidnapped her now."

# 31
# THE GANG'S ALL HERE

**OFF WE WENT.**

Mami Wata knelt in the middle of the raft, her lips pinched and a determined look in her eyes. The goddess's dress had somehow transformed once we'd risen into the air, morphing into an aquamarine pantsuit with emerald bangles above each ankle. Her feet were still bare, but her toenails and fingernails were painted a vibrant shimmering blue. We were soaring over the Burning Sea. Beneath us, the waves were getting choppier, sending flames shooting up as the winds grew stronger. The storm clouds had moved on from MidPass once the tree was destroyed. I had no doubt that was what Bear had intended. The green-veined thunderclouds now raced us across the horizon. I shivered. The poison Bear had inflicted upon the Tree of Power was spreading.

It was headed for the Golden Crescent.

We were, too, but only once Nana's storytelling squad had been assembled. It was still an absolute trip for me to think about my grandmother as a part of some interdimensional bridge club. (For the uninformed, which until recently included myself, bridge is a card game popular with grown-ups. I think it's rated PG for Parent Games.)

Right now we were going back to Lady Night's juke joint—or what was left of it. I had the location loaded in Alke Maps, and Ayanna had the raft speeding through the gray morning sky. I dreaded what we were going to find—or not—but it seemed I had no choice.

"So."

Mami Wata's voice dragged my attention away from the coming troubles and back to the present. "I believe some introductions are in order, right, young man? I already know Ayanna. Many times have I seen her flying through my domain."

"It's a pleasure to formally meet you," Ayanna said, managing to look respectful and reverent while also keeping us afloat.

"But the others…" The goddess raised an eyebrow, looking just like an aunt who was chaperoning your first date. The one who pretended not to notice when you did that arm-stretch yawn when she drove you and your date to the carnival.

No, I'm not talking about me, I'm just being hypothetical.

Anyway.

I cleared my throat and pointed around the raft. "That's Gum Baby holding the phone—sorry, the Story Box in phone form—and inside the phone is Anansi."

"The trickster?" She raised an eyebrow imperiously, like a queen studying her subjects. "Yes, I believe I did hear something about his…new form. And Gum Baby, your name has been spoken in my halls for some time. Impressive."

The little terror actually blushed. Blushed! Who knew sap-covered wood could do that? But before I could drag her for it, the river goddess turned to me.

"And you…Tristan Strong. You are your grandmother's descendant through and through. Stubborn. Hardheaded. Impulsive."

I cleared my throat but remained silent. It didn't seem like a good time to open my mouth. Things usually got worse when I did.

"And yet here we are." Mami Wata stared out over the sea. After a couple seconds, she shook her head. "Well, I'm glad you're stubborn."

*Wait, what?*

"I'm sorry…Did you just…Happy I'm stubborn? Being hardheaded is a talent now?" I couldn't believe it. Those words needed to be written on a T-shirt that I could wear twenty-four seven. It was the ultimate permission slip I could use anytime I wanted to do—

Mami Wata frowned, and her eyes flashed blue-green in warning before returning to their natural black. "Don't get carried away now, hear me?"

"Of course not," I said, straightening up, even though I'd been doing exactly that.

“Good.” Then, after a few seconds: “Your grandmother would be proud of you. *Is* proud of you. You’re the only thing she ever wants to talk about, you know. ‘My grandbaby did this, or went here, or helped with that.’ She loves you.”

Something prickled the corners of my eyes. “I’m going to get her back,” I said softly, not meeting Mami Wata’s eyes. “I swear it.”

She nodded. “I believe you. It’s not everyone who would give up their powers to save someone else.” And with that, she gave me back my adinkra bracelet. Apparently, now that she was free and restored to her former glory, she didn’t need it anymore. I thanked her and slipped it back onto my wrist. I flexed my wrist tentatively…. It still hurt, but I could manage.

We sat there in silence, the wind rushing around us as Ayanna angled the raft south. Gum Baby had stuck the SBP to the floor of the raft beneath her, and occasionally she and Anansi would shout at each other about directions before relaying them to Ayanna. Those two, I swear. Some people argue for no reason.

“Why would Gum Baby make a left turn there? The directions say go this way!”

“Because, my young sap-prentice, that way is a shortcut.” “Who you calling short?”

While they argued, we left the Burning Sea and crossed over rolling hills. Our shadow rippled on the landscape, and at any other time it would’ve been beautiful to watch, our height notwithstanding. But there was a growing tension that gripped my chest, like my nerves and dread were doing a group hug with my lungs.

Something bad was about to happen.

And when the compound with Lady Night’s juke joint appeared on top of a hill in the distance and everyone on the raft gasped in horror, my fists clenched so hard I thought my palms would bleed. I realized then just how bad things were going to get.

The juke joint was no more.

Lady Night’s juke joint had been obliterated. The walls had been blown apart, ripped to kindling and strewn up and down the hillside. Musical instruments lay scattered among the wreckage. A tuba. Half of a kick drum. I even saw the splintered remains of the stage at the bottom of a grassy slope.

Thank goodness Lady Night had gotten all her clientele out in time. But had she herself escaped? When I glanced up and met Mami Wata's eyes, I could tell she was wondering the same thing.

Ayanna set us down in one of the few spaces not covered in wreckage, and we stepped from the raft carefully. Gum Baby scrambled up to my shoulder, which Mami Wata raised an eyebrow at but didn't comment on.

I held up the sticky SBP so Anansi could get a good look, too. He scanned the area desperately. "I don't see him."

No one had to ask who he was referring to. I swallowed a lump and cleared my throat. "Maybe someone came to their rescue." I still hated the fact that we hadn't stayed to fight to the end.

"But how do you know?"

I'd never heard the trickster god's voice filled with such uncertainty and pain. I didn't answer but clenched my fists even tighter. From my vantage point on the hill I could see most of Alke and the storm gathering overhead. The poisonous clouds crowded over the Golden Crescent, flashes of green lightning illuminating them from within. We had to hurry and find everyone before it was too late.

"Tristan!"

Someone called my name from down the hill. I picked my way through large wooden beams and piles of trash to peer over the side. A giant sigh of relief escaped and some of the tension drained from my body.

Lady Night and a crowd of others waved from beneath a small copse of trees in front of the Isihlangu foothills. In fact…I squinted, then my eyebrows shot up in surprise. A few folks in the crowd were carrying familiar shields and beautiful clubs that ended with polished stones on the end—kieries.

It appeared Isihlangu had arrived to help.

I searched the crowd as I walked down toward them. My expression must've been pretty desperate, because when I reached the bottom of the hill, one of the Ridgefolk warriors stepped forward to say, "The princess isn't here."

I tried not to look too disappointed. Thandiwe would have been really helpful at the moment, but it seemed she was still on her mission with High John. Another god we could've used in the fight against Bear.

Lady Night greeted me warmly, then—to my surprise—strode forward and hugged Mami Wata fiercely. "How are you feeling?"

The water goddess squeezed the boo hag, then shook her head. “Better, thanks to the timely assistance of this boy here. If not for him and his… friends, this world and his would be doomed. Now at least we have a fighting chance.”

Lady Night smiled at me, and my face got hot.

“Boy, is you blushing?” Gum Baby rapped me upside the head. “Act like you been here before.”

I tried not to think about picking her up off my shoulder and throwing her into the trees. Instead, I looked around. The damage was sobering, almost depressing. No, it *was* depressing. “Junior?”

The boo hag hesitated, then shook her head. “While he was fighting Bear, I left to get help. When we came back, there was no sign of either one of them. Maybe…”

Her voice trailed off, but my mind finished her sentence. Maybe he’d survived and escaped. It was unlikely, but it was all we had.

Bear was responsible for all this.

The thought made my blood boil. And yet what could I do? Coming up with a plan that would save Nana, defeat Bear, and stop the poisonous storm from weakening and eventually severing the connection between my world and Alke—it seemed almost impossible. And time was running out, so every second mattered. The storm of the century was blotting out the sun, and lightning strikes cut through the air with searing flashes.

Mami Wata sighed, then turned to me. “We should summon Annie.”

“Oh, right.” I pulled out the SBP. Anansi made a *voila* gesture at a newly recharged Riverboat Rideshare app. The crowd begin to murmur as a familiar mist began to creep along the ground, spilling out of the trees and hiding the juke joint’s wreckage from view. They shuffled closer, peering at the spectacle, and a worrying thought leaped to the forefront of my mind.

“Everyone!” I shouted. “Move up the hill if you don’t want to be carried away.” Just as I yelled the warning, a boat’s horn blasted. The sound of trickling water emerged from the mist, and Mami Wata’s face lit up as an enchanted keelboat launched out of the treetops.

Launched. Out. Of. The. Treetops.

“YAHOOOOO!” a voice boomed from the helm of the wooden boat, and the vessel landed with a mighty crash in the misty river. Keelboat Annie stood on the deck and waved to everyone. She wore overalls again, this time with a ripped pink collared shirt. Annie hopped down and—with a

few giant steps—met us. To my surprise, the first thing she did was sweep up Mami Wata in a huge bear hug and twirl her around.

"Well, if this don't beat all," she said with a beaming grin. "And here I thought the old gang had seen its last days. Ha! Can't keep a good story group down." Then, as the mist faded, Annie saw the devastation around her and her eyes grew wide. "I didn't do that just now, did I? Sometimes I get carried away with my entrances and I have to tell myself, 'Annie,' I says, 'don't go too overboard with the shenanigans.' But I get so excited—"

Mami Wata caught one of Annie's massive wrists and patted her hand gently. "No, cousin, that wasn't you. It was the Masked One. Bear."

Lady Night shook her head, then embraced the two of them as well. It was a reunion I'd never thought I'd witness. But one was still missing. As if the thought had struck them all at the same time, they separated, their faces solemn.

"The gang isn't all together yet," Annie said with a frown. "We need our fearless leader."

My grandmother.

Mami Wata turned to me. "Well, young man, you've brought us together. There's a plan, isn't there?" Annie and Lady Night looked at me as well, and so did the former patrons of the juke joint and the warriors of Isihlangu. Then there was Ayanna, Anansi, and Gum Baby. They were all counting on me.

"There is," I said grimly. "Everyone is always telling me Alke is a story. My grandmother, the gods, you all. And Bear knows that, too. Your world is connected to mine by stories. Bear wants to destroy that connection. His storm is filled with the essence of the iron monsters who devour stories. If that storm washes over Alke—"

"The whole realm will be consumed," Anansi finished, his eyes filled with anger.

I nodded. "We have to get all the gods and goddesses together and—"

But before I could finish, a giant thunderclap rattled the sky and shook the ground. Seconds later, green lightning stabbed downward from the largest group of clouds hovering over the Golden Crescent. A bright flash lit up the evening, and everyone flinched.

Bear's storm had finally arrived.

# 32
# BEACHFRONT SHOWDOWN

**“SO LET ME TRY TO UNDERSTAND THIS SCHEME OF YOURS.”** I kept my eyes glued to the screen of the SBP, ignoring the trickster god swinging in a hammock in the top right corner. I couldn’t help it. The Alke Maps app was open, and I finally had a reason to use the weather-radar feature. Dark-green splotches spread from the west, creeping across the map in real time. It was little comfort that the storm had avoided MidPass. Mami Wata’s fountain must have been protecting the deserted island.

“You want to enter a city at the center of a storm to confront a powerful villain who thinks you’re responsible for everything bad in his life?” Anansi shook his head as he hopped down from the hammock and paced back and forth. “That boy Reggie must have knocked your brain clear out of your skull.”

“It will work.”

“And what’s with the quilt?”

“It’s filled with Nana’s stories. She once told me that in order to repair it, we’d have to start from the beginning. I thought she meant just starting fresh with new squares, but now I know she meant recording the stories that she’d heard from these goddesses before. If we can use something powerful of hers, we might be able to break her out of Bear’s story chains. It will work.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

I didn’t respond. It had to work. I knew Anansi was worried about his son, so I was trying to keep his mind off the worst possibility, which forced

me to mull over my own options. What if something went wrong? What if we weren't strong enough to challenge Bear?

I shook my head. We *were* strong enough. We had to be.

The storm-cooled wind ripped around us as we soared toward the Golden Crescent, and I had to struggle to keep my balance, even while sitting down. Ayanna's magical raft could expand when necessary, but still it was crowded, what with Mami Wata, Lady Night, Keelboat Annie, Ayanna, and myself taking up the front half with Nana's quilt sections spread out between us. I didn't know sewing was so tough! I'd pricked myself with the needle several times already, and I was struggling to maintain pace.

"Does he always talk this much?" Lady Night asked. Anansi was still muttering to himself and stalking back and forth across the SBP's screen.

I snorted. "You have no idea."

"Both of them are yappity-yaps," came Gum Baby's voice from behind us. She was standing on the rudder, steering the raft by leaning from side to side. I just…Sometimes I just can't with her. I shot her a halfhearted glare and then returned to the quilt sections in my lap.

My job was simple. Well, not that simple. But it was definitely easier than everyone else's, and I took a moment's break to watch them work.

Mami Wata whispered as she touched each square, infusing each individual image with the power of the sea, of a people stolen but unbowed, of a million faces gazing up from beneath the water. Blue-green crystals and emeralds materialized as she spoke quietly to the quilt, sweeping across the squares like a miniature tidal wave.

Lady Night sang softly as she sewed, and wove the song of Alke into the tapestry we were making. It was a wordless song, and yet one I instantly recognized. The drumbeat. The melody. The centuries of power and resiliency distilled into a rhythm that could be playing on a church piano or booming from someone's subwoofer. Everyone's head lifted a bit higher as she sang, and the quilt seemed to respond as she worked. Each square began to shimmer, the patterns and images shifting as I watched.

Keelboat Annie laughed as she stitched. It was like she was listening to a comedy routine in her earbuds and it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Her laughter was the kind that felt like it would split your ribs and make your face hurt. It was the sound of unworried determination. The sound of someone who had been told for years that she couldn't do what

she had already proved she could, that she couldn't wear what felt comfortable to her, that she didn't belong. Her laugh gave the quilt strength. It wouldn't tear again, I was sure of it.

Ayanna, like the pilot she was, connected everyone's squares so they moved in the right direction.

And me?

I worked on the border that would hold it all together, all the while telling the quilt a story. I whispered and shouted and laughed and cried, willing each emotion into the fabric that represented Alke. I told a story relayed to me by a powerful woman who'd witnessed so many struggles, who'd given so much of herself, who'd empowered so many. And another tale about two plat-eyes desperate to reach their loved one.

The stories in each quilt square were unique, representing different places and experiences. The Diaspora. But when they were collected like this, they came together to make a beautiful artifact we all could appreciate. And the act of sharing it made us stronger. I had to make sure Bear understood that. I had to make sure Alke understood that.

If I didn't, we'd be torn apart, just as the quilt had been.

"Tristan?"

I looked up, my hands clutching a square of fabric. Everyone was staring at me. Was my fly open? Was there something on my face? Could it be—?

Mami Wata cleared her throat and nodded down at the SBP, where the Alke Maps app showed that we were nearly on top of the dot representing the Golden Crescent. I peered down from the front of the raft. Sure enough, we were flying over the bay. The few ships below were still moored, but the storm was tossing them about like toys, and trees were bent over nearly sideways as the winds howled. Gray-green clouds blotted out the sun and covered the land in shadow. Lightning struck an ivory tower, leaving black scorch marks and the smell of something burning in the air.

And there, in the middle of the beach, high waves battering uselessly against his armored form, stood Bear. John Henry's stolen hammer was clutched in his paws. But my eyes were focused on the person sitting on an overturned rowboat in front of him, her head held high and her hands folded calmly in her lap, staring straight ahead.

Nana.

“Take us down,” I said quietly to Gum Baby. My words were nearly lost in the wind, but for once the little doll and I were on the same page. We spiraled down and landed in the shallows, just as fat droplets of stinging rain began to fall. Everyone piled off the raft, spreading behind me in a semicircle.

Bear stepped forward, the mask of King Cotton shifting as he sneered. “Little hero, *grum grum*, I was getting worried you wouldn’t make it. Welcome!”

I took a deep breath, then waded toward him.

*No turning back now.*

*Who’s that young girl dressed in blue…?*

The choppy sea sent waves to batter my calves and ankles. It took all my strength not to fall flat on my face, especially since I was holding the quilt above the water and my eyes were locked on Nana’s. Bear loomed ominously behind her, squeezing John Henry’s hammer, glaring at me through the eye holes of the poisoned mask.

*It look like the children coming through….*

I don’t know why that old spiritual was filling my thoughts right then. The marina gleamed in the eerie light of the stormy sky, and I could see Nyame’s palace on the hill above. If I couldn’t stop Bear in time, John Henry would…

I shook my head clear. Stay positive.

*You don’t believe I’ve been redeemed….*

I mouthed the words as I continued to march across the beach. Nana was ten yards away. Eight. Five. Three. We were separated by mere feet and her eyes still stared blankly at something no one else could see. My fists clenched.

“Well, well,” Bear rumbled as he stepped around the rowboat to stand in front of me. “What does the little hero have in his hands? A burial shroud? A sheet to drape over your body once I pound it into the sand, *grum grum*?”

Bear began to whirl the stolen hammer slowly, and the iron head started to glow a faint green as it made a figure eight in front of me. The air sizzled as the hammer passed by my face, and I flinched, stumbling backward and landing on the seat of my pants.

Bear laughed. “The great hero of MidPass! The champion of the Battle of the Bay! Scared. A coward, *grum grum*. Who would’ve guessed? Oh.

Me. I've known it all along." The hammer dropped onto the sand as he threw back his head and roared in amusement.

I flushed and scrambled to my feet. I had to get him away from Nana. Once I rescued her, the others could take on Bear.

*Just so the whole lake goes looking for me…*

The words echoed in my head. I fumbled with the quilt, flipping it over until I found the square representing Nyanza. The last line of Nana's favorite spiritual was embroidered on it in spiraling golden thread.

The lake. The river goddess. Could it be?

I pulled out the phone, staring at Alke Maps while Anansi watched me incredulously. "Boy, have you lost your mind? You kids and your phones will be the death of us all."

But I was looking for something specific. A certain island in the middle of a storm, free of the poisonous taint and clouds.

The image of the geyser of cleansing water, the storm clouds blown apart, rinsed away by the power of a goddess.

"The fountain of Mami Wata," I whispered. "It cleared the poison from MidPass. If we can do the same here—"

"We just might have a chance of stopping Bear and his nearly invincible armor," Anansi concluded.

Bear had finished laughing and was staring at me suspiciously. I turned and threw the SBP back toward my friends. "Gum Baby, catch!" I shouted.

Without a second of hesitation, she leaped high into the air, not bothering to catch the spinning phone with her tiny hands. Instead, she rotated so that it collided with her back, sticking to her as she went tumbling out of the sky, only to land safely in Keelboat Annie's arms.

"Anansi knows what to do!" I shouted.

Annie nodded, then her eyes widened and she pointed behind me. I turned just in time to see a dark shape swinging at my head. I ducked, but the hammer clipped the side of my shoulder and sent me tumbling head over heels into the waves. Sand choked my nostrils and I swallowed some, coughing and rubbing my eyes with the quilt as I tried to stand back up. My arm felt numb, as if it was in so much pain my brain had simply shut down feeling so I didn't have to deal with it.

"Tristan Strong punched a hole in the sky," Bear sang, his voice muffled by the mask. Was it my imagination or was the mask glowing green, too? He stomped toward me. I struggled to my feet, but his paw shot out and

grabbed me, squeezing my other arm so hard I cried out in pain. I dropped the quilt. “And let the evil in. Cities burned, now what did we learn?”

He turned and hurled me up the beach, and I landed hard, air forced out of my lungs with a giant *whoosh.* I groaned in pain as I rolled over, then froze.

Bear crouched over me, his iron-monster armor scraping together as the mask moved to within inches of my face.

“I will never,” he said softly, “let it happen again.”

His paw shot forward and grabbed me around the throat. He lifted me high in the air, then raised John Henry’s hammer as well. I kicked helplessly, holding on to his paw with both hands in a futile attempt to free myself.

“See this, little hero? This is your twice-doom. This hammer will crush you like the bug that you are, and then, as your grandmother speaks the story of Alke, it will sever your world from ours. Forever!” Lightning forked across the sky, and to my horror, it didn’t disappear. The bolts left jagged scars in the sky, like a crack spreading across glass. The sky was splintering. Alke and my world were being torn apart! If I couldn’t do something about it, and soon, Nana and I would be stuck here, and we’d slowly fade away along with the rest of Alke.

“We have…to be…united,” I gurgled. “Or we’ll all die. I can help. We…can help you.”

The mask nearly touched my face as Bear leaned in even closer, and what little breath he hadn’t squeezed out of me escaped in a gasp. His eyes were as green as the lightning, as green as the chains that had strangled the Tree of Power. The mask vibrated with poisonous energy.

I could almost hear King Cotton’s voice as Bear spoke. “I would rather die,” he growled.

He raised the glowing hammer high in the air. It was now or never. I dropped my hands and squeezed them into fists, ignoring the lingering pain in my right wrist. The akofena shadow gloves shimmered into view, and with a last-ditch effort, I swung with all my strength.

*Thud, thud, thud.*

A triple right hook collided with Bear’s mask, knocking it out of place and skewing his vision. It barely hurt him, but it distracted him just enough that the hammer went whistling inches away from my head and Bear’s grip

loosened around my throat. I kicked off his hullbeast chest plate and slid out of his grasp, falling backward. I scrambled up and over to the quilt.

Bear growled and straightened King Cotton's mask, then stomped forward—

And paused.

"Look!" I shouted, holding up the blanket.

A golden light covered us both. Bear took a fumbling step, an armored paw reaching out, before withdrawing.

"What is this?" he growled.

"You don't recognize them?" I stretched my arms out wide, drawing Bear's attention away from the beach and filling his eyesight with the image on the quilt.

"It can't be," he whispered.

We'd worked feverishly adding a new square to the quilt. One new scene—the goddesses infusing the fabric with as much magic as they could spare, and me relaying the story of the plat-eyes as we worked. I'm sure it wasn't perfect, but it didn't have to be. No story is perfect for everyone, but everyone can find the perfect story when they need it most.

On the square, two bear cubs frolicked in a field while a larger bear stood watch over them, smiling.

Bear and his two cubs.

He raised his head, looking at me, and the green in his eyes flickered, as if he was trying to fight the poisonous hatred flowing through his system.

"Help me," Bear whispered.

# 33
# HOSED DOWN

**I TOOK A STEP CLOSER TO BEAR.**

Lightning flared in the sky, illuminating the mask of King Cotton. A dark shadow slithered within the hardened sap—

And the mask re-formed, hardening, covering Bear's face completely.

Bear roared in pain, a muffled sound that vibrated the ground around me. He reared up, arms swinging wildly.

"No!" I shouted. We'd been so close. That mask had to come off—but it wasn't ready to relinquish its grasp on Bear's hatred.

I threw myself to the side, avoiding a flailing paw, and slid partway down a sand dune. When I stood, Bear's mask was back in its original shape, with slits for eyes and a gash for a mouth. His eyes were glowing green again, and he took a step forward…straight into a humongous stream of seawater that made him stagger back as it crashed into his chest. And then came another burst. And another. Each spray blasted the rogue god, knocking him off-balance.

Bear let loose a spluttering roar. "What sort of trickery…?" But his voice trailed off as he looked to the sea and stopped in his tracks.

This was the backup plan, just in case the sight of his cubs didn't work. We'd have to remove the armor the hard way.

Mami Wata stood thigh-deep in the sea, her eyes flashing blue-green, the flared hems of her pantsuit waving behind her like the tail of some mystical mermaid. Giant waterspouts, cyclones made of mist and vengeance, spun around her. Three, four, five of them! Her arms were spread wide as she glared at Bear. One hand flicked forward and a

waterspout hurtled toward the beach, leaning until it was horizontal and striking Bear with the full force of a dozen firehoses.

Keelboat Annie had summoned her boat, and she, Lady Night, Ayanna, and Gum Baby were aboard. They raced on the back of Old Man River, leading miniature typhoons to the beach. There the swirling water combined into an explosive spray that hammered Bear.

His earsplitting roar shook the ground.

"Enough!" Bear shouted angrily. He shielded himself with one massive paw as another waterspout blasted him. His armor hung off him in ruins. The hullbeast chest plate was soggy and rotted, and the fetterling chains dangled like dull, tattered clothing. "You can't do this, *grum grum*!"

I sprinted forward and yanked off the chest plate, just as I'd ripped the wooden tub holding Mami Wata back in MidPass. Bear's fur was matted and singed underneath, as if it had never healed properly. He reached out blindly, one waterspout still hammering him in the face, and I skipped away before I lunged forward again to rip off an arm plate.

Piece by piece I stripped Bear of his poisoned armor. The gauntlets. The greaves. The rest of the chest plate. Ducking and dodging and slipping Bear's paws in a manner that would have made Granddad proud, I fought the round of my life. The shoulder guards. The leg greaves. All of it came off, until finally a waterlogged and weary Bear collapsed to his knees, wheezing and coughing up seawater.

The water attack ceased.

Only the mask was left.

And I hesitated to touch it. I just…Something inside made me recoil. I still felt the thorny tendrils of King Cotton's vines snaking up my wrist. I still heard his voice in my head. It was King Cotton holding me back in my nightmares, preventing me from rescuing the ones I loved.

Bear was right. I was a coward. I'd lasted this long and couldn't deliver the final knockout punch. I stepped back, stumbled, and fell.

I looked over and my gaze landed on Nana still sitting there, stiff as a board, but now she was staring straight at me.

*Get. Back. Up.*

She didn't say the words, but she might as well have. I turned back to Bear, to the mask with its oily blackness that swirled beneath the surface. I stood up, lunged at it with a cry of fury, and yanked it off. Then I hurled it as far as I could into the bay, which made my shoulder scream with pain.

When I turned back around, a patchy-snouted, crooked-eared face met mine, the green slowly fading from the eyes, leaving behind the haunted expression of someone dealing with a lot of anguish.

I recognized that look.

It was in every mirror I passed by.

“Where am I?” Bear whispered. “What’s happening?”

I took a cautious step forward despite the hisses of warning behind me and stared him straight in the eyes.

“You’re safe,” I said.

The tension drained out of him, and his head drooped as his shoulders began to shake. I was about to offer him some comfort when I heard:

“Tristan!”

Gum Baby’s shout had me spinning around looking for another attacker. An iron monster? The Maafa again? Was a mind-poisoned mob rushing forward, ready to stomp me into the sand?

No.

It was worse.

# 34
# THE WORLD UNDONE

**WE WERE TOO LATE. THE STORM HAD ARRIVED.**

A streak of lightning, bigger and wider than any I'd ever seen before, split the sky in two before striking one of the boats in the marina.

As we watched, sickly green lines like snakes coursed through the water and then up the beach, turning everything dark gray, as if the essence of the world was being drawn out.

"Oh no," I whispered.

As if the poison had been injected into the veins of the city, it raced up the wide marble streets to the palaces. Everywhere it went, the world was ruined. Towers and minarets tumbled down like wave-swept sandcastles. Rivers and streams bubbled and boiled before turning into noxious steam. The ground shook as the jewel of Alke was consumed.

At this rate this entire world would fall piece by piece, and then mine, and there was nothing we could do about it.

Or was there?

John Henry's hammer rested in the sand a short distance away. I couldn't…. Could I?

A thundering sound filled the air. I whipped around to stare in horror as Nyame's great palace began to collapse in on itself, disintegrating into a cloud of fading gray story fragments and green clouds. Were the gods still in there?

My lips pressed tight together. I didn't have a choice.

I ran to where John Henry's hammer lay and, after a moment's hesitation, tried to wrap my hands around its giant handle. I waited for the throbbing in my wrist—but it never arrived. Finally, some good news. A tingling sensation rippled through my fingers, and I nearly let go. Before my very eyes, the hammer began to shrink, the engraved metal head morphing and the handle narrowing and shortening until it was the size of my forearm.

It reminded me of the Story Box, the way it changed shape to suit the wielder. This was a magical weapon, unique and powerful, which made what I was about to do hurt even more.

I squeezed my fists around the hammer shaft until the akofena shadow gloves appeared. I squeezed until the gloves gleamed in the air, and then I squeezed some more. I thought about the stories of Alke, the stories that belonged to this world and to my world and connected both, and I squeezed and squeezed and squeezed.

When I opened my eyes, the akofena gloves burned with a black fire that danced up and down the hammer. The giant thundercloud squatted above us, leaking poison that drifted down and seeped into the land and sea. I had to stop it.

*Sometimes there ain't no fixing something, baby. If you wanna rebuild, you gotta break it down and start all over.*

Before I could talk myself out of it, I tossed the hammer into the air and cocked my right fist back as far as it could go. When the hammer began to fall back down, I hit it with the strongest uppercut I could manage. If I'd been wearing regular gloves, I would've broken my hand.

But these were the shadow gloves.

*BAM!*

John Henry's hammer shot into the sky. It streaked through the morning like a comet, trailing shining black fire as it punctured the storm cloud.

One second passed. Then another.

*BOOM!*

The thunderclap that followed felt like a right hook to my ears and knocked me off my feet. Then I couldn't hear a thing. Sand blasted my face and I squeezed my eyes shut as hurricane-force winds swept the beach. A wave slammed into me, sending me spinning farther up the dunes before it tried to drag me back. I had to claw deep furrows in the sand to hold on. Shielding my eyes, I stood and tried to find the others.

But I saw nothing but gray.

Had I made things worse? I couldn't even see my own hands in front of me.

"Nana!" I shouted. I took a step, then another half step, before stopping. What if she or the others were trying to find me? Maybe I had to stand still. I rubbed sand out of my eyes and tried to squint around. Everything was so blurry.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Nana!" Nothing. If only I could see….

"Wow, Tristan," I muttered, "you suck as a hero." Taking a deep breath, I pinched Nyame's adinkra and cautiously opened my eyes…

And gasped.

The power of the sky god's charm protected my eyes from the vicious storm. But, even more important, it showed them what the poisonous winds and devastating lightning Bear had unleashed were doing to Alke.

And it was terrible.

The land was outlined in words of silver, the people in twisted braids of copper and ebony cursive writing. The water glimmered the same color as Mami Wata's turquoise eyes in wavy handwriting, and the Golden Crescent…well, it was golden. (Not sure what you were expecting there.) Lines of golden script framed the city like a gorgeous skyline.

But the storm was ripping it all apart.

The story of Alke, the very fabric of the world, was being destroyed. Cruel winds tore apart the land and used the sea to drown it. Words, phrases, entire passages containing the origin of the realm were hurled into the sky, where they disappeared. The world was dissolving in front of my eyes.

A faint shout zipped past me. "Tristan?"

Nana! I spun around wildly and searched for my grandmother. There. A shimmering outline farther down the beach, surrounded by a maelstrom of fragmented silver sentences, huddled on the sand, hugging herself as if she was freezing.

She was fading, too.

I needed to find that quilt. Maybe, just maybe. But where was it? Bear had made me drop it, and I hoped it hadn't washed out to sea….

I desperately scanned the area and finally saw a faint glimmer on the sand under a big piece of driftwood. Could that be it? I sprinted toward it.

Yes! The fabric was damp and caked with sand, but it was still in one piece, and the poison hadn't leeched its colors. I shook it out to dry it a little, then raced to Nana.

More glowing forms appeared as I got closer, including a large oblong object tossed to one side. But I only had eyes for my grandmother. I raced to her and draped the quilt over her.

Instantly the whirling greenish-gray fog disappeared, and with Nyame's adinkra I could see the quilt's golden aura slowly drawing the poison out of my shivering grandmother. The howling wind seemed to die down a bit.

"Are you okay?" I asked, skidding down beside her. With the poison draining out of her, Nana appeared as a coil of ruby-red script, as rich and powerful as the blood that we shared, the blood of the people. Her face, with the spectacles still perched on the end of her nose, turned to me.

"I'm fine," she said. "But this world is on its last legs if we don't do something."

"It's too late," I said mournfully. "Nana, we need to get home. Right now."

"And leave these poor people to their fate? I know I ain't raise a fool who raised a fool."

"But—"

"With all the powerful folks 'round here, we can't help those who need refuge from a silly storm? That's mighty sad, if you ask me."

I looked up to see other shimmering forms coming toward us. The wind, the same sickly green color as the poison, tried to batter everyone back, but they continued to push forward, and slowly I recognized them all.

The large oblong object I'd seen before was Keelboat Annie's boat. The goddess held it upside down, using her keel pole as a handle, so that it acted as an umbrella, sheltering everyone underneath. Lady Night, Gum Baby, and Ayanna were there, as well as a shivering Bear. Mami Wata was in back, doing her best to redirect huge waves that threatened to swallow the land whole. She pushed them off to the side to strike harmlessly at the base of the towering dunes.

"Look!" Gum Baby called.

Alkeans streamed down from the palaces above, including some familiar faces. A giant man crossed the beach in short, stumbling strides, outlined in powerful golden words that spoke of his strength.

"John Henry!" cried Ayanna.

His legs were restored, yet he walked with a limp and was struggling to pull a massive yacht through the shallows behind him. Golden letters swirled around his free hand in tight spirals. He caught me looking at them and nodded, then opened his fingers to show me what rested in his palm.

The pair of gloves he'd given me, which I'd left on his sickbed.

"Thank you," he said simply.

I nodded, then hesitated. "Your hammer—" I began.

"Later," he said, a sad, knowing expression in his eyes.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked him.

"I reckon most are, though it was mighty close." Many citizens of the Golden Crescent peeked over the edge of the yacht, the Flying Ladies among them. Miss Sarah and Miss Rose were using their wings to shelter people from the worst effects of the storm.

A harsh caw split the air, louder than the din of the storm. Vast black wings flapped, and my heart swelled with happiness and relief. High John and Thandiwe rode on the back of Old Familiar, the shadow crow, along with others too sick or injured to walk…including Brer Rabbit. And then a line of golden statues moved stiffly down the dunes, carrying wooden palanquins with the injured and infirm inside. I had to shield my eyes—the statues appeared as blazing figures of white-hot cursive. Nyame, just as brilliant, stepped out of one of the conveyances. He had his hands full— literally. Several babies and a young crow were cradled in his arms, and his golden eyes latched on to me almost immediately.

**We are out of time.** His words boomed into my head. **Soon this world will be no more.**

Gum Baby scrambled up my legs and onto my shoulder. "So, uh, Bumbletongue, Gum Baby ain't scared or nothin', but you got a plan, right?" Her voice was tiny, her bravado stretched thin and fear beginning to seep out.

I looked around. Everyone wore scared expressions or put on brave faces. Another huge lightning bolt turned the entire sky white, then zigzagged to strike the top of the marina across the beach.

*CRACK!*

The building exploded in a blinding flash of broken words, and someone screamed. But before I could even let out a *Sweet peaches!*, a shout from Thandiwe made us all turn around.

"No!"

Far in the distance, Isihlangu was spiraling away into nothing. The shield of Alke was unraveling like one of Nana's wool sweaters.

I gritted my teeth. It was time to do some reknitting.

"Everybody!" I shouted. "Onto the boats! I *do* have a plan."

# 35
# UNITED WE STAND

**KEELBOAT ANNIE'S BOAT AMAZED ME AT EVERY TURN.** First, I thought it wouldn't fit all the refugees on board. Wrong. Then I thought there was no way John Henry, Bear (even as emaciated as he looked without his armor), Brer Rabbit, and the other gods would fit, too. Wrong again. We all managed to clamber aboard, soaked to the skin, teeth chattering in our mouths.

A ground-shaking rumble made the boat lurch to one side.

"Look!" someone shouted. The Golden Crescent seemed to *shudder* and heave up, then collapse in on itself. Golden braids of story—the contents of Nyame's Story Box, Anansi's trickster tales, and others were carried up into the sky, lost in the brightness of another lightning strike.

"We're going to disappear!"

"Help us!"

"Do something!"

The cries of Alkeans filled my ears as I dropped down next to Nana. She, of anyone, would know if my plan would work. If it didn't…well, I didn't want to think about that. The wailing around us wouldn't let me.

"Nana, I need your help," I said. The boat tossed and dipped as I described what I wanted to do, and her eyebrows nearly shot off of her face. She removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes, wiped her lenses, then looked up at me and shook her head. My heart dropped into my perpetually soaked shoes. But before I could lose hope, she put a hand gently on my arm.

“You don’t need my help to do that, baby.” She jerked her head toward the back of the boat, where the gods of Alke were trying to comfort the folks they were responsible for. “Seems like they’re more your speed. Besides, I told you I was gonna get you to try your hand at this one day. Seems like now’s as good a time as ever.” She produced her golden needle —a spare quilting needle (Now, where had she been keeping that?)—and gave it to me, using both hands to fold my fingers over the shining tool. She smiled, then brought me forward into a hug. “Strongs keep punching,” she whispered in my ear, then pushed me back and shooed me away. “Now go and save the world. I’ve got a bridge game at seven, and lord knows, if Miss Thang Ruby Lee James waits a second longer than she has to, the whole world will hear her complain.”

I grinned, then stood and made my way carefully over to the others. I had to lean into the wind as Alke unspooled around us, the essence of this realm that was linked to mine swirling about like a sandstorm of magic. But I still had Nyame’s adinkra activated, and the gods—my friends—stood strong in the encroaching darkness like statues of gold. I took a deep breath, then pulled out the SBP. Anansi was hiding under a makeshift lean-to he’d rigged out of a few apps and some spiderwebs. “Boy, I really hope you know what you’re doing.”

I shook my head, pausing as a vicious gust of wind nearly lifted me off the boat. “Nope. But when has that ever stopped me?” I told him my plan, and he whistled.

“That might actually…work. It’s risky. Really risky. But…Oh, what’s the use, you’re going to do it anyway. Fine. Let me know when you need the Diaspor-app.”

While he prepared, I got close enough to address the other gods. “There’s a way we can save your world and all the people in it…but it will take all of us.”

John Henry grimaced in pain as he leaned on Annie’s keel pole as a crutch, the only thing big enough to support him. “What you figurin’ on doing, Tristan?”

I took a deep breath. My heart was beating so loud I felt like *it* could be the rhythm of Alke on its own. “I…am going to stitch Alke into my world.”

Silence.

In the space between, the storm raged, the winds howled, and several gods stared at me as if I’d just loudly admitted to taking baths in peanut

butter. I mean, if that's what you like to do, go for it. No judgment here. Just not my preferred way to bathe.

"You're going to stitch—" Miss Rose began.

"—our worlds together?" Miss Sarah ended. I nodded. If we didn't act soon, we'd all be swept away no matter what.

The boat heaved upward as a giant wave lifted us to the sky. My stomach flipped. We hung in the air forever, long enough for me to see something farther out on the Burning Sea. The sight was a punch to the solar plexus, robbing me of what little breath I had left before we crashed back down onto the water.

"Watch out!"

Before I could tell anyone what I'd seen, a second wave loomed overhead, a wall of white-capped gray curled like a fist ready to pound us to smithereens. Everyone grabbed something—a rail, a rope, John Henry's leg, anything that would keep them safe. People started screaming. But before the wave could batter the boat, it began to unwind, just like the rest of Alke, strands of the sea drifting up into the devouring storm clouds.

And what loomed behind it, what I had seen while we were in the air, was even worse.

"Is that—?" High John began.

"No!" someone shouted.

"Not again!"

"Sweet peaches," another person whispered, and I was half surprised to realize it was me.

Gum Baby's grip tightened on my shoulder; even Nana's face paled and her eyes widened at the glowing phenomenon. I pressed my lips tight together. From the outside I looked calm and determined, but really I was trying to hold back a scream.

There, at the edge of the bay, where the normally clear blue water met the fiery dark fathoms of the Burning Sea, framed in a swirling orange-red mist, was another hole in the sky.

It was as if someone had unzipped reality. A raging inferno gashed its way up into the clouds, and it was sucking up the poisonous storm like a vacuum, inhaling the maelstrom and sending it through to a new world fresh and unspoiled. It was a portal into a different realm—my realm. And through it I could see—

"Is that the farm?" Nana asked faintly.

I gritted my teeth.

No way was I going to let anything happen to my grandparents' farm. They hadn't put their sweat and blood into that land just to lose it to a stupid storm. NO! It would not happen.

"Grab the quilt!" I said, shoving one end at High John. He looked baffled, but there was no time for confusion, only action. "Grab it!" When his fingers finally closed over the border, I moved on down the line of gods. John Henry. Miss Sarah and Miss Rose. I tucked one corner into Brer Rabbit's feeble paws. The giant rabbit's whiskers twitched, but otherwise he didn't move. Even Bear grabbed hold. I handed the SBP to Gum Baby, then pointed. She scrambled onto the quilt and sat in a sticky heap near the center. At least I didn't have to worry about her blowing away.

I took one corner of the quilt, tugged at the thread I'd so carefully stitched at the border, and pulled it loose. I held Nana's golden needle just so while ignoring the storm screaming at us and the hole dragging us closer and closer. The angle of my wrist had to be right, or the thread—the magical essence that could tie two worlds together—might slip out of the needle.

Push down. Pull up.

The keelboat turned sideways as another wave surged beneath us. Someone screamed, but I didn't take my eyes off my work.

Push down. Pull up.

Sewing, as it turned out, was a lot like boxing. If that sentence doesn't make sense to you, it's cool, give it a minute. What I mean is, you need technique. Skill. Perseverance. It takes time to get good at it. If you rush, you'll just have to start all over, either from stitch one or round one of the next fight.

Push down. Pull up. Tie off the thread.

Almost finished. Just needed to add one more thing.

The opening between worlds was a few dozen yards away. It hummed with an energy of wrongness, like an untuned electric guitar someone was playing through an amp the size of a house. It made your teeth rattle and your eyeballs itch. I couldn't see the point where the tear met the Burning Sea, or the top, where it disappeared into the storm. Fiery mist obscured it all.

I ripped my eyes away and surveyed the boat of refugees. Keelboat Annie had one hand on the tiller and one hand on the quilt, straining to keep

us straight. A few people were crying, and I think I saw Bear comforting a small hedgehog. Everyone clutched at one another, even the gods. There was something terrifying in that, but it was also reassuring. Even the strongest of us needed support, and that was okay.

"Mami Wata!" I called. The water goddess lifted her head from the other end of the boat, where she was working to keep us from being swamped with each newer and bigger wave. "When the next wave comes, can you direct it toward the hole?"

Multiple sets of eyes whipped around. "You want to go through?" John Henry yelled over the storm. I didn't answer. Instead, I looked at the Flying Ladies.

"Do you think you two, when I give the signal, could flap your wings as hard as you can in my direction?"

They glanced at each other. "You

might—" "—be lost to the sea!"

I shook my head. "I'll be anchored tight. Right, Gum Baby? Precoffinary measures."

Gum Baby stared at me like I was stupid, then her eyes widened. "Ooooh. Gum Baby smell what you boiling. One set of precoffinary measures coming right up."

I addressed everyone else. "I don't know if this is going to work like I want it to," I yelled. "I don't know if we'll make it through together. We might get split up. But Alke is a story. As long as we keep the threads intact, this world can be rebuilt. I believe that. You have to as well."

I looked each one of them in the eye before I spoke, and I put every ounce of Anansesem power I had into the promise. "So hold on. If we do get separated, remember this: I know your stories. As an Anansesem, I will find you. As your friend, I. Will. Find you."

I wanted to say something momentous. Something that captured the changes we were about to undergo. But I didn't have to. The storm did it for me.

With a great peal of rolling thunder, like an avalanche in reverse, the poison having seeped into the core of the land, Alke imploded.

The shoreline fell away. It just…dropped, caught in the jaws of an invisible shredder that ripped the world to its very fibers. As we bobbed on an endless sea, fragments of the land twisted away in the wind, great clouds of them. With Nyame's adinkra activated, it looked like glowing spools of

silk being carried up into the sky, reds and greens and silvers and golds all slipping away to be lost forever.

Not if I could help it.

“Now!” I shouted at Miss Sarah and Miss Rose.

The winged goddesses let their gleaming black wings stretch out to their fullest extent, their brows furrowed and their muscles straining against the wind. Angels descending to provide aid. They shouted as one and unleashed a massive flap that ripped forward, sending fragments of Alke across the boat.

Right toward me.

At the same time, Mami Wata labored, pulling together a wave that was the queen of all waves, a towering behemoth of gray and white crowned in burning orange. It reared up beneath the boat, and Keelboat Annie struggled to keep the vessel straight.

And me?

The hero of Alke?

Champion of a dying world?

I quilted.

“Golden Crescent!” I shouted. Gum Baby, sitting on my shoulder, held out her arm and I plucked off a fragment of Alke’s story thread that had become stuck to the little doll. I looped the material onto the quilting needle and went to work. When that piece had been added to the quilt, I looked up. “Nyanza next.”

A blue-green strand was passed over.

“The Sands.” A wheat-colored thread was attached to the quilt.

And so it went.

My needle went faster and faster, giving birth to a new world even as an old one died.

MidPass.

Isihlangu.

The Horn.

In my mind’s eye I saw Alke from above as I’d seen it on the back of Old Familiar, when MidPass burned during my first adventure in this realm. It was a gleaming tapestry. That’s what I was building.

I only hoped this would work.

Looking up, I caught John Henry’s eyes. “I’m gonna need your help to give this some power,” I said. “I’m gonna need everybody’s help.”

John Henry stared back in confusion.

"Remember when you and Brer Rabbit worked together to send Gum Baby through to my world? You had to give up some of your essence to make the trip between realms. For this to work, we need even more power."

"Tristan, we're getting close!"

Gum Baby, still covered in a few fragments of Alke, pointed. The tear between the worlds was a stone's throw away. Time was up. I tied off the last stitch, stuffed Nana's needle back into my pocket, and beckoned everyone closer. Gods and Alkeans, people and animals, and a boy and his grandmother.

"Everyone, grab hold. You all," I shouted, looking at the gods, "put every ounce of power you've got into this quilt. What unites your world and mine are the stories we share. My grandmother told me that." Nana leaned against me briefly and I swallowed and forged on. "You are your stories, and your stories are Alke. So put your stories into these threads. Every tale, every lullaby, every joke. And hold on! Please, whatever you do, don't let go. I don't know how long this quilt will stay in one piece, but as long as we hold it together, we can bring Alke home."

The giant wave crested and we picked up speed. Keelboat Annie lashed the tiller straight so we pointed directly at the widening rip between the worlds. Behind us the last of Alke unspooled, consumed by the world-eating storm.

"Now!" I shouted.

If I'm totally honest, I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't know what the others saw—the Alkeans and Nana. I don't even think the gods themselves were paying attention to anything other than infusing the quilt with the power of their own individual stories.

But, thanks to Nyame's adinkra on my wrist, I saw.

And what a story it was.

I saw words and moving images of all different colors. I heard faint echoes of songs, vibrant and powerful and achingly beautiful. Everyone holding that tapestry contributed. Yes, the gods, and me as Anansesem—we did our part, but so did the ordinary folk. Their tales went into the stitches, filling the squares with life. Children's laughter infused the quilt with the joy of a new generation, and elders shared their tears of sadness over the departed. Underneath it all pulsed the heartbeat of a nation, and it was a familiar rhythm.

We were united.

The keelboat plunged through the hole in the sky just as the sea disappeared out from under us.

All sound was silenced.

Darkness swept over us.

Only the flickering glow of the enchanted quilt cast any light, bathing the underside of everyone's face in soft gold. I had one last second to meet everyone's eyes, to send my hopes and prayers and love to my friends and family before even that small source of comfort was extinguished.

And then…

…there…

…was…

…nothing.

# 36
# I WILL FIND YOU

**I WOKE TO THE SMELL OF PANCAKES AND BACON.**

I don't know why, but that fact made me angry. Those smells were for normal people. Ordinary kids could wake up and grab a plate while avoiding adults who were chatting and laughing and pouring their coffee, then sneak their way to the couch to watch Saturday morning cartoons.

Not me.

*Bzzzt bzzzt*

The SBP vibrated on the nightstand next to me, but I ignored it.

I rolled over on the mattress only to stop and let out a grunt of pain when my heavily bandaged ribs protested the change. I opened my eyes, glared at the bright sunlight spearing in through the bedroom window, and shoved my head under the pillow.

Someone knocked on the doorframe. "Heard you moving around. You all right?"

Granddad.

I removed the pillow. He wore his traditional work clothes—denim overalls with a cotton T-shirt underneath, and, sticking out of a side pocket, a faded brown bandanna for mopping his forehead. But there were new additions as well. His head was bandaged, as was his left arm, and he walked with a wince and a limp. He had a plate balanced in each hand, one heaped high with pancakes and the other holding a couple of slices of cantaloupe and a mug.

"Yeah. I mean, yes, sir. I'm all right."

He nodded, though his eyes lingered on my bandages as I carefully sat up and pushed back the covers. “Good. Was gonna bring your breakfast in, but if you’re up, I’ll leave it on the kitchen table for you.” He turned to go.

“Hey, Granddad?”

He looked back at me.

“How is she? Nana, I mean. Is she…?”

I stopped talking when Granddad’s shoulders slumped a bit. He didn’t answer for a second, then turned his head away. I could still see one eye glistening. “No change, really. Made her favorite breakfast. I’m gonna sit with her for a while.”

*Bzzzt bzzzt*

His eyes dropped to the phone, then looked at me, and I braced for a lecture about it. But…Granddad didn’t say anything except “Come on out when you’re ready” as he moved on.

“Okay,” I said. I slumped back onto the bed, staring at the magical phone, but my mind was elsewhere.

Two days had passed since we’d come through. My plan had partially worked. The keelboat had crashed into my world, landing in the middle of the Bottle Tree forest on the edge of Granddad and Nana’s farm. Good thing it had happened after midnight and there weren’t any neighbors within a ten-mile radius. The sudden appearance of a heavily damaged wooden boat straight out of the early twentieth century miiight have turned a few heads.

And the good news was there were only a few injuries. My ribs were one. Nana had sprained her knee, and after her previous collapse, the doctor had confined her to the bedroom for the foreseeable future. As for the others—

*Bzzzt bzzzt*

“Boy, if you don’t check your messages,” came Anansi’s voice, “I will make your ringtone ‘The Ballad of Gum Baby.’”

I looked over at the phone. The spider god, hollow-eyed and gaunt, sat in the corner of the screen. He hadn’t moved from that spot since our return. Everyone had lost their home in Alke. But many, like Anansi, had lost something far more important: family and dear friends.

*Bzzzt bzzzt*

“Oh, for the love of—” I reached over, ignoring the pain in my side, and snatched up the phone. There was a golden dot in the corner of the Diaspor-app. I frowned. After a moment’s hesitation, I tapped the icon.

Three pictures filled the screen. Captions scrolled beneath them, and I read the first one aloud.

"'Story fragment detected. Show location?'" I squinted.

My eyes grew wide and I shot out of bed. "No way! Anansi, are you seeing this?"

He took a peek, then stood up suddenly and gripped the edge of one of the pictures, his voice raw and desperate. "Tell me this isn't a joke."

"I don't joke." I threw on a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt and sprinted out of my room. "Back in a minute, Granddad!" I shouted as I ran out the door.

The sun barely peeked over the canopy of the Bottle Tree forest. The heat wave had broken and the air smelled sweet, the aftermath of the storm that had poured in through the rip. My bare feet squelched in muddy puddles and then pounded the damp path that circled the farm's cornfield. A stitch in my side nearly doubled me over, but I forced myself to keep running. The SBP was in one hand and the other pumped through the air as if the information I needed would save my life.

And then I was there.

I skidded to a stop in front of the gnarled sentinel trees that guarded the Bottle Tree. I hesitated, but a gust of wind swirled around me and the leafy branches seemed to sway to the side, allowing me entrance. I bowed my head in thanks, then forced myself to walk calmly into the dim forest. A thick quiet covered the place, as if all noise stopped at the path outside out of respect.

The first time I'd entered the forest had been at night. Everything had looked scary back then, when the landscape was unfamiliar and I was chasing after a tiny terror.

The Bottle Tree stood in the center of the clearing, bright blue ornamental bottles hanging from the small weeping myrtle's stiff, straight branches. My eyes didn't linger on it long. Instead, I looked up, searching for something else. A new addition to the forest.

Near the top of the canopy, an oblong shape blocked the rest of the sun. I marched over to the tree that was holding it up and cupped my hands over my mouth. "It's me! Let me up."

A rope dropped down, a loop tied at the end. Gingerly, I stepped onto it and held on for dear life as I was yanked up twenty feet in the air. Gulping,

I stepped off the rope…and onto Keelboat Annie's boat.

Well, I guess it was a tree house now.

Inside, a small group of exhausted and bedraggled Alkeans stared at me. Nyame. Bear. Annie. Lady Night and Mami Wata. A few assorted citizens of the Golden Crescent. And, finally, Brer Rabbit lay on a homemade cot at the back of the boat. John Henry rested on the floor next to the large rabbit, bandages covering his legs, a rough woolen blanket in his lap.

So few here. So many lost, scattered across the country to who knows where.

Gum Baby.

Ayanna.

Miss Sarah and Miss Rose.

High John and Thandiwe.

Before I could tell anyone about what I'd seen on the SBP, Mami Wata stood. Her face was grim as she studied something in her hands. Actually, as I surveyed the deck, everybody's expression was wavering between fear and defeat. No one—not even Nyame—wanted to meet my eyes. I stopped, confused. I knew their situation was dire, but this was something else.

Something bigger, it looked like.

"What is it?" I finally asked. "Tell me."

But Mami Wata didn't speak. Instead, she walked toward me, her pantsuit shimmering as she moved, her hair corralled into a loose bun. She held up the object, and when I saw what it was, my pulse quickened.

A piece of King Cotton's mask.

"I found it this morning, at dawn," she said.

I took the shard of hardened sap in my hand and held it up to the sunlight. There was no more sign of the inky shadow inside. "Maybe it… he's gone."

"That's not all." Mami Wata looked down over the hull. "There were shards of glass on the ground as well."

I stared at her, then sprinted to the edge of the boat. What I saw made my heart fall and land at the foot of the Bottle Tree below. Even from up here I could see the empty branches, the broken blue glass sparkling on the forest floor like gems.

Someone had broken almost half the bottles that had held trapped haints and evil spirits. And with King Cotton no longer imprisoned in his mask, I had a strong idea about who was responsible.

I squeezed the SBP tight, and it vibrated in response. Anansi peered at me out of the screen and nodded. He knew exactly what I was thinking. Now we had two jobs to do: tracking down the haints that had escaped into this world, and keeping the promise I'd made before we'd gone through the hole in the sky.

I was determined to keep that promise. And maybe I could start at that very second. I held up the phone, the pictures blown up on the screen. Everyone's eyes went wide.

"I hope you're all rested up," I said, "because we have work ahead of us. We're going to find King Cotton, bring him back to this forest, and recapture every single haint he freed. And that's not all. We have friends and relatives out there, and I don't know about you, but I plan on finding them, too. Starting with these three."

A brown-skinned Black girl was walking out of a gas station, a backpack slung over her shoulder. Her dark brown curls were tinted red at the tips, the sides of her head were shaved, and there was a zigzag part on one side. She wore a black leather jacket, skinny jeans, and gold flats. A golden baseball bat was strapped to her back, a glaring face painted on the barrel. In this world she looked completely different, but I recognized the Alkean pilot instantly.

A boy followed her, his dark brown skin gleaming from the camera's flash. He was in the middle of blowing a bubble with chewing gum, and he wore a sleeveless tank top with jogging pants, and multiple beaded bracelets on both wrists. Hanging on his shoulder was a cross-body satchel.

Anansi let out a ragged sob of relief.

But there was one more picture. Peeking over the boy's opposite shoulder was a tiny, sticky brown face I never thought I'd be so happy to see.

I looked around the room and let out a fierce grin. "Let's go get our friends."

Do you understand now?

I'm coming for you.

I've got the SBP alerting me each time it spots another Alkean here in the United States. It pings me whenever a haint shows its evil face. It's on, King Cotton. The final round. I've got powerful folks in my corner and a rhythm in my fists. And don't think we're limited to Alabama. Ha, nope!

That'd be too easy. I'm going to find you, and I'm going to find them. Please believe, I will bring every single one of them back to their family.

Because Alke wasn't…*isn't* just another realm.

Alke is a story.

Each of us carries parts of it—chapters, scenes, even just a few words. And when we come together? That magical world is brought to life. And as long as we continue to pass on the story of its existence to others, it can never be completely destroyed. Maybe, just maybe, word by word and line by line, we can rebuild that special place we call our own.

So…keep your eyes peeled.

And if you're Alkean—from MidPass, the Golden Crescent, the Grasslands, wherever—remember this:

I'm coming to find you and bring you home.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book wouldn't have been possible without the help, support, encouragement, existence, persistence, strength, and tireless advocacy of the women and gender-nonconforming people in and around my life. There's a saying that goes: "Behind every strong man is a strong woman." What it should say is: "In front of every strong man are three stronger women, maybe more, so let's start with their story."

To my mother, carrying the torch alone and yet not alone.

To my wife, relentless in her passion for our children (your children, my children, the world's children) and their ability to learn without restriction.

To Jendayi and Carol, both leaders, examples, and sisters.

To Lauren and Nikki and Wobby, pillars of support in our family.

To Shani, Kylie, Kendi, Maddy, Nia, Aminah, and Zuri, who will take over what we have left them and reshape the world.

To my aunts, my cousins, my grandmothers, my branches and roots on the family tree. Without you I couldn't grow.

To Dhonielle, Sona, Patrice, and Steph, thanks for believing in me.

To Nina, thank you for the songs "Four Women" and "Sinnerman," which helped inspire this story.

To her, she, they, them, and you…thank you.

**KWAME MBALIA** is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*, for which he received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor award from the American Library Association. He lives with his wife and children in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is currently working on the third book in the Tristan Strong trilogy. Follow Kwame on Twitter @KSekouM.

**RICK RIORDAN**, dubbed "storyteller of the gods" by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series, including Percy Jackson and the Olympians, which brings Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. Millions of fans across the globe have enjoyed his fast-paced and funny quest adventures. The goal of Rick Riordan Presents is to publish highly entertaining books by authors from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to allow them to tell their own stories inspired by the mythology, folklore, and culture of their heritage. Rick's Twitter handle is @RickRiordan.

RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS
TRISTAN STRONG KEEPS PUNCHING
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
KWAME MBALIA

Also by Kwame Mbalia

*Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*

*Tristan Strong Destroys the World*

Copyright © 2021 by Cake Literary

All rights reserved. Published by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of Buena Vista Books, Inc. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney • Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023.

Created in association with Cake Literary

Designed by Tyler Nevins
Endpaper illustration © 2021 by Sveta Dorosheva
Cover art © 2021 by Eric Wilkerson
Cover design by Tyler Nevins

LCCN 2021013564 (ebook) • ISBN 9781368065993 (ebook)
LCC PZ7.1.M395 (ebook)
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021013564

Follow @ReadRiordan
Visit www.DisneyBooks.com

# Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

1: Stay Strong
2: A New Mission
3: The Return
4: Catch a Fire
5: Lectures and Warningsss
6: Mortar Over Bones
7: When the Haints… Come Marching In
8: The Kids Are All Right…for Now
9: The Ferryman's Warning
10: Angola
11: Haint No River Wide Enough
12: Haint Blue
13: If One of Us Ain't Free…
14: The Gods Must Be Cranky
15: Real Heroes Take Taxis
16: The Old Tricky Sticky
17: Gods in Grayscale
18: Spirit Utility Vehicle
19: The Rolling Thunder
20: Erzulie
21: The Redliners
22: Patty Roller's Wig Emporium
23: The Gods Hate Redliners

24: The Hidden City
25: Alke Is a Story
26: The Boys Are Back in Town
27: Breaker, Breaker
28: Chicago Over Everything
29: Beachfront Breaker Hunt
30: A New Challenger Has Entered
31: She Don’t Miss
32: The Gum Buddies
33: The Final Fight of Tristan Strong

Epilogue
About the Authors

*To the angry*

# 1
# STAY STRONG

**IT SHOULD BE PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE HUMAN BODY TO** burst into flame. Aren't there rules against that? I'm pretty sure my Life Science class covered it last year. Call me old-fashioned, but I'm a firm believer that people aren't meant to be matches.

So that's why I stared in utter horror at the small silver flame popping out of my knuckles.

"I don't like that," I said, my voice sounding faint and distant to my own ears.

That was probably wrong to say. For several reasons. First, I was already trying my best not to lose my temper and attract attention. Our tour guide kept shooting angry looks at our group and shushing us. And we weren't even being that loud! No more so than anyone else on the tour. Still, I was pretty sure my bursting into flame would get us more than a mean look.

We were stuffed in the middle of a crowd in a tiny museum crammed with fascinating exhibits. Granddad called it the Pharmacy Museum. From that name I expected to see boring displays, like the history of headache medicine or something like that. Instead, I learned about century-old tools used to probe, prod, and investigate the human body. Pretty cool! But again,

the place was jam-packed. Everybody in the French Quarter must've come for a tour. So I definitely didn't want to cause a panic because my fist had turned into a Flamin' Hot.

Yes, the Strongs were in New Orleans. One last adventure before I headed back to Chicago to start the new school year. It was bittersweet. I mean, I was looking forward to getting home, being back in my neighborhood, and seeing my parents. Still, I'd had fun with Granddad and Nana. I'd eaten a bunch of key lime pie, done a little boxing, fallen into another world with powerful gods and made a bunch of folk-hero friends…. You know, the normal summer.

I was excited to visit the Big Easy, but this trip had come with a few strings attached. And—

"What don't you like?" someone said over my left shoulder. "The artificial leech? C'mon! That's so cool! Apparently back then you'd jam that thing into your—"

"Thank you, Terrence," I whispered, covering up my burning hand. The tour guide glared as Terrence continued to hiss facts at me. I shot a glare right back, and the guide huffed and turned around. Then I looked at the walking encyclopedia behind me. Terrence was a short, thin Black boy with a red-tipped lightning bolt dyed into his close-cropped hair. He was also one of those aforementioned attached strings.

"No more ancient surgery lessons," I said in a low voice. "Please."

He shrugged and continued to mutter trivia to the stranger next to him. I shook my head. Terrence was my nine-year-old cousin, Dad's brother's son, and the second reason I had to keep things to myself. The powers that be (Nana) had decided that Terrence needed a buddy, someone to partner with as we toured New Orleans, and guess who that was?

Lucky me.

Terrence wore an oversize lime-green T-shirt with an icon of a flexed bicep on the front and STRONGS ON THE MOVE written beneath it in bold black letters. On the back, BLACK IS A RAINBOW arced over interlocking hands in different shades of brown. Yeah. Brown and lime green. The message was great! The aesthetics? Eh. I (unfortunately) was wearing the same shirt, and four or five others in the Pharmacy Museum were sporting it as well.

You've probably figured out what was happening.

It was a Strong family reunion.

Relatives I hadn't seen in years—and some I'd never met at all—had made the trip. Great-aunts, cousins, their children. I met my Uncle Jeff-Jeff and what he called his emotional support pug (also, strangely, called Jeff-Jeff). In fact, it seemed the only ones not here were my parents. They'd been unable to make the trip—something about car trouble—and Mom had stressed the importance of me representing for the Chicago Strongs. What I did would reflect on them. So, you know how it goes. Best behavior and all that.

Which brings us to the third reason I had to avoid making a scene. I was on a mission.

Two weeks ago I had returned from my second trip to Alke, the magical world where storied folk heroes like John Henry, heroines like Keelboat Annie, gods like Anansi and Nyame, and goddesses like Mami Wata reigned.

Unfortunately, it was also my last trip there. Alke had been destroyed, and the only way to save its inhabitants had been to weave the story of their world into mine. Now Alkeans were scattered across the country, and it was my responsibility to help find them and make sure they were okay.

Whiiich you can't really do when you're a line buddy for your cousin.

"Where should we visit next?" Terrence asked as we exited the museum. "I could use some dinner first." He pulled out his phone and started scrolling different travel websites, then gasped. "Tristan, look! There's a pizza parlor that gives you an oversize spatula if you eat a whole supreme pie!"

He looked at me with way too much glee in his eyes (could that be a medical condition?) and I shook my head. "We're supposed to wait here for Granddad, then we'll move to the next stop." The hotel, I hoped.

My phone vibrated. I froze for a second before reaching for it. Fortunately, the flame had disappeared from my knuckles, and Terrence was still busy reading about pizza. I pulled a sleek black smartphone from the back pocket of my basketball shorts.

The SBP, or Story Box Phone, was the magical treasure chest of Anansi tales. Nyame the sky god had transferred the stories from an actual box into my phone and then trapped Anansi himself inside with them. That hadn't stopped the spider god from bossing and heckling me at every opportunity. The plus side? Anansi had turned out to be a talented web designer and had added all sorts of cool apps, including one that alerted us to the location of

Alkeans. I now had the most advanced smartphone in this realm or any other.

The spider god stared out at me from the home screen. His expression was impatient as he pointed to the Maps app icon. “What’s taking you so long? We’ve got to get a move on!”

“Okay, where’s the alert coming from?” I asked Anansi.

I wanted to tell him about the knuckle flames, but just at that moment Terrence moved closer to me. I turned to prevent him from being able to see the SBP’s screen. *I’m on the phone*, I mouthed to him, pointing to the buds in my ears. He frowned but went back to scoping out which pizza he apparently wanted to cram inside his face.

“Hurry up, Tristan,” said Terrence. “I’ve always wanted a pizza spatula. I’m going to be a chef, you know. Open my own restaurant and serve my famous teriyaki pizza.” He licked his lips, and I shivered. Some food preferences should remain private.

I looked back at Anansi. “Well? Where should I send Nyame?”

Hey, I was only twelve. I couldn’t exactly go gallivanting across the country by myself to find every Alkean. But the sky god could.

Anansi shook his head. “No, you’re not listening. Right here, just a few blocks away. There’s an Alkean who needs help in the French Quarter!”

I inhaled sharply. Yes! We could handle this ourselves! All I had to do was give Terrence the slip, and then we could—

A tingling sensation pricked the corners of my eyes.

That was weird. I squinted. Rubbed at them. Blinked a few times, but the sensation wouldn’t go away. I had just turned to ask Terrence if there was anything in my eyes when I saw someone I recognized. He was whistling while walking down the street in the opposite direction.

Tall.

Neatly dressed.

Evil.

King Cotton was strolling through the French Quarter without a care in the world.

The way I figure it, no one is owed anything. Not an easy life. Not a happy ending. Nothing. I learned that from Granddad. Life comes at you fast, like a flurry of jabs and hooks, and sometimes the only thing you can do is learn how to take a few on the chin and keep on standing.

And not every story is neat and tidy, either. Sometimes pages are missing, ripped out by forces beyond our control. Sometimes the villain wins. Sometimes the villain wins by a *lot*. And not every question may get answered. I mean, there are a hundred stories unfolding without our knowledge every day, and the details will never see the light of day because we either can't or won't seek them out. So, tough luck, the ending to that chapter is forever shrouded from view.

Until someone comes along and tries to tell it. Tries to tease out the answers, give folks some closure. That's my role as an Anansesem—a seeker, recorder, and teller of stories. I didn't ask for the title—the title chose me when I was in Alke. In fact, I didn't want the job. I didn't think I'd be any good at it. But I was wrong. And despite my best attempts to avoid the responsibility, the magic of my people's stories didn't care about my objections. Since I was the reason the characters in those tales were now scattered around the globe, telling their stories was one thing that only I could do.

Maybe Nana had said it best the first week after we'd returned to our world. She'd been laid up in bed, recovering from being abducted, and the two of us were talking about Alke. And stories. When I mentioned it was hard to find the energy to speak about the world I had destroyed, she peered at me over the new quilt she was working on.

"You gotta find the pulse of the story, baby," she'd said. "Let the rhythm beat like a heart, and hold on to that pulse once you got it. Don't change it, no matter what anybody else says. Even if they call you a liar or selfish, or say you lucky to be here, or tell you to go somewhere else if you so unhappy, you don't let it go. Then speak those words. Tell the story."

*Tell the story.* I wanted to do just that. But how could I when King Cotton, the haint who had corrupted everything in Alke, now had his sights on my world? I had to stop him first.

"Hoo HOOO! Boy oh boy oh boy."

I'd shoved the phone back into my pocket and was two seconds away from tearing off after Cotton when Granddad walked out of a seafood grill a few doors down from the Pharmacy Museum. He was licking his fingers and doing a little jig, something everyone in the family called his *good-eatin' shuffle*. Nana followed him, no stranger to Granddad's apparent

inability to say no to an order of battered clam strips. He had a bunch of take-out bags in his hand, and Nana was scolding him.

“Walter, you done stopped at every restaurant selling fried clams. You ain’t supposed to be eating those! What you gonna do with all them, plant them?”

Before I could duck away, she spotted Terrence and me and steered Granddad toward us. Granddad didn’t look up from his clam strips. He’d eat two or three, smack his lips and exclaim how good they were, then roll the bag closed and open another. It was like watching a squirrel eat nuts, except this particular squirrel knew how to throw a mean right hook and could ground you.

“Maaaaaaaaaaan, let me tell you about these clam strips right here!” Granddad said when they reached us.

I rolled my eyes. Anytime he started with a *Let me tell you*, I knew we weren’t going anywhere soon. Might as well unfurl a sleeping bag and put on your pajamas, you’re going to be there for a while. Few things riled up Walter Strong more than a crisp, well-fried clam strip. Which would have been fine any other day (that’s not exactly true, but what was I, a mere twelve-year-old, supposed to do?), just not when Cotton was on the loose.

My pocket vibrated twice. I checked to make sure Granddad was distracted (which was easy, since his eyes were closed as he bit into another clam strip) before pulling out the phone. Granddad hated how often I checked it. Meanwhile, Terrence told Nana about the pizza parlor.

The screen winked to life, and the worried face of a trickster god stared out at me.

On an average day, Anansi had a contagious smile and a twinkle in his eye. You never knew if he had your back or had a trick in his back pocket. He was the Weaver, the owner of all stories, from truths to tall tales, and his name was embedded in my title of Anansesem. But at the moment, the spider god looked far from his normal self.

I slipped in one earbud and his voice, normally melodic and lilting, was flat and strained. “Well, are we leaving or not?”

I peered around the crowded street filled with tourists just like me and my grandparents. It was early evening, but the Louisiana sun still beamed down on the French Quarter as if focused through a magnifying glass. My own reunion T-shirt (yes, still lime green) clung to my back, my black basketball shorts felt like they weighed thirty pounds, and my new all-black

Chuck Taylors (*That's the second pair we bought you*, Granddad had grumbled) felt like their soles were melting.

Still, everywhere I looked, people were laughing, joking, shopping, eating, dancing, and carrying on their merry way through what was possibly the most vibrant square mile in the whole country. Music thumped from Bourbon Street a few blocks over while the casinos on Canal Street flickered to life. Adults and teens and children walked by with powdered sugar dusting their lips and fingers as they bit into soft, hot beignets and—if you didn't know any better—life was all good.

Yet a shadow lingered now, just out of sight. Cotton. The haint's specter hovered in my peripheral vision, waiting for the right moment to strike.

I shook my head. "Not just yet," I told Anansi. "But—"

"Time is running out, Tristan! We have to move!" There was resignation in his voice. He already knew the answer.

"I know," I said. "It's just… all my family is here."

Anansi didn't respond, and when I glanced at the SBP, I saw he was sitting with his back against the edge of the screen, slumped and depressed. I realized, too late, what I'd just said, and I opened my mouth to say more, but no words would bring back his family—specifically, his son—safe and sound, so I closed it. Sometimes condolences don't ease the hurt—they just make things worse.

"Hey now, what's with that face?"

Granddad's voice came from behind me. He cradled another container of clam strips as if it were a baby, but he wore a concerned look. Nana was speaking to Terrence a few feet away, both of them huddled over his phone as they picked the next destination for our Strong subgroup. "You look like you just got sucker punched, boy. What's the best way to defend against that happening again?"

I snorted, though there wasn't much humor in it. Granddad always had a boxing analogy ready to apply to any situation, and he'd quiz me at various points throughout the day to test my knowledge of the sport. History, theory, techniques—it didn't matter. He'd only let me go back to doing whatever I was doing if I answered his questions correctly.

If Gum Baby were here, she'd call it a Grandpop Quiz. I smiled, and then it faded from my face. The little loudmouth was lost out there somewhere, too. As much as I hated to admit it (and if you tell her, I will

sing “The Ballad of the Gummy” nonstop outside your window), I missed the tiny sap monster.

“Well?” Granddad asked.

I sighed, stared into the crowd streaming past, and racked my brain. “Um, dodge it?”

“You take a sucker punch, you didn’t dodge anything. Not for a good minute. Try again.”

“Keep my head on a swivel? Make sure I’m always aware.”

Granddad pursed his lips. “Better, but still not all the way there. Think about it. Sometimes an opponent will get the drop on you, and they’ll send punch after punch at you. Those blows gonna land and land hard. Knock you back. Stun you. How do you defend against a flurry like that? How do you respond?”

I struggled to come up with an answer, but at that moment the SBP vibrated. Three times in a row. That wasn’t a signal from Anansi. That was an alert.

“Tristan.”

Granddad’s voice jerked me from my thoughts. He loaded me up with his take-out boxes and bags so he could place both hands on my shoulders. Then he pulled me close, into a hug. My arms were too full to hug him back, but I was too surprised to respond anyway.

“Sometimes,” Granddad said, squeezing me tight, “you just have to hold on. Clinch, and catch your breath. The world is going to hit you hard, son. Clinch and don’t let go until you can keep on fighting. Hear me?”

“Yessir,” I said, my voice muffled by his shirt.

Sometimes I forgot that Granddad had been violently introduced to the world of Alke when Bear—under the poisonous influence of the haint King Cotton—had attacked the farmhouse and kidnapped Nana. Had Granddad felt helpless while we were gone? Sucker punched?

The SBP vibrated again. Granddad sucked his teeth and stepped back. “Boy, who is that blowing up your phone? Tell them Stanleys to give you a break.”

I groaned. “No, Granddad, no, no, no. They’re called stans. *Stans.*”

“Stans, Stanleys, Stanford Cardinals, you need to tell them to lay off.” Granddad took back his clam strips and popped a few more golden-brown pieces into his mouth, chewing angrily. “I’m trying to teach here, and you,

Mr. Popular, can barely focus. Go on and answer that, boy. I won't stand in the way."

I grinned even as I pulled out the phone and began to back up. "It's not like that, Granddad. I just need to check something real—"

"Tristan, watch out!"

Anansi's shout came from the earbud I still wore, even as the SBP was snatched from my hand. I whirled to see a kid running into the crowd.

"Hey!" I cried.

"Tristan—" Granddad began, but I was already tearing off after the robber.

"C'mon, Granddad!" I shouted and sprinted down the street.

# 2
# A NEW MISSION

**TAILING A THIEF THROUGH PACKS OF SIGHTSEEING ADULTS WAS** giving me a headache. Or maybe the pain was from the elbow that clipped my head when a woman had tried to shake one too many appendages to the street band's rhythm. I'd be seeing stars and her not-quite-a-two-step for days to come.

Granddad kept one hand on my shoulder as we weaved between people. Then we bumped into a cluster I couldn't find a way through. "Did you see who took it?" he asked.

I hopped up and down to try to see over the throng. "No. He was too fast," I said, scowling. "He's got to be around here somewhere."

We scanned the area for several moments, but it was just too crowded. A line of people stretched down the block to my left and disappeared around the corner. A mouthwatering aroma wafted from the open doors of a restaurant. My stomach grumbled, and I sadly but deliberately turned away. *Another time, gumbo, my old friend. Another time.*

On the other side of the street, two kids played a complicated but catchy rhythm on a set of street drums—several overturned buckets, two plastic storage bins, and an old pot—while a third played a harmonica and a fourth held a brass horn to his lips. The beat snuck inside my head, and soon I

caught myself nodding and tapping my fingers on my thigh as I searched. Finally, however, I sighed and gave up.

"Sorry, Granddad. Guess I lost him."

Granddad grunted and popped another fried clam into his mouth. "Not really supposed to be eating these," he mumbled to himself. "Your grandmother wouldn't approve."

I raised an eyebrow. Walter Strong, being irresponsible? Impossible.

Just then Granddad looked up and caught the partial smirk on my face. The stony frown he leveled at me could've cut glass. "Better watch them eyes, boy. You supposed to be the leader, so lead. Try asking some folks. What about them three boys making all that racket over there?"

I stopped and frowned. "Wait, did you say '*three* boys'? What three boys?"

Granddad looked at me strangely, then pointed with a half-chewed clam strip at the drummers and harmonica player across the street. "Them."

I whirled. The fourth member of the band was gone now, and I realized —too late—that he had only been pretending to be part of their group. I muttered something under my breath and took off, sprinting past the boys and plunging into the dark side street behind them. "Come on, Granddad— we've got to catch up!"

"Hold on, boy—my clams!"

I raced down the street, among the cars in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and skidded to a stop. Granddad huffed up behind me, shaking his head. "You know I can't run and eat at the same time, Tristan. Did you lose him again?"

I punched my palm in frustration. Where had he gone?

Something hissed, and it took me a moment to realize the sound was coming from me. I'd been so close, *so close*, to finding my friends and yet I'd failed….

"Sorry, Granddad," I muttered. "Guess we ran all this way for nothing."

"Now just hold on. Don't go giving up yet." He sucked down another lungful of air and then straightened and began to examine the area. "You got fooled with the okeydoke once, ain't no harm in double-checking to make sure it don't happen again. Now, tell me what that boy was wearing, and let's see if we can't spot him."

I sighed and tried to remember. "Yes, sir. Well… he had on a T-shirt, pants with suspenders… A hat—one of those kinds Dad likes to wear. And

he was carrying an instrument. A saxophone, maybe? No, a trumpet!" I was looking up and down the sidewalk as I spoke, trying to keep an eye out, when Granddad's hand landed heavily on my shoulder.

"A trumpet?"

I nodded.

Granddad pursed his lips and then jerked his head toward the other side of Rampart Street, where there was a big arch with a gate under it. "We can check one more spot—Louis Armstrong Park. Horn players like to hang out there."

I stared at the gates blocking the entrance, then turned back, only to see Granddad toss his empty food bags in a trash can and head for the crosswalk. That man really inhaled those clam strips. I shook my head and hurried after him. "Is it open?" I asked. "Do they close the park at night?"

Granddad strode up to the gates and gave them a shove. One swung open, and he smiled at me. "They haven't closed up yet. We've still got a bit of time. Come on, do you want to get your phone back or not?"

There was no way I was going to pass this up. Somewhere in Louis Armstrong Park, I hoped, there was a trumpeter with the SBP, and the sooner I found him, the sooner we could rescue the lost Alkean, and then I could focus on running down Cotton.

Congo Square.

That was the name of the clearing we entered. A sign on a pole near the path explained that the space had once served as a meeting spot for enslaved Black folks. This was where they had exchanged news. Exchanged songs. Exchanged solace, comfort, and hope.

And apparently, as I surveyed the plaza, this was where spirits now came to dance.

Seriously. Everywhere I looked, ghostly apparitions dressed in their Saturday night finest were hitting moves that made my calves cramp as I watched. At first I thought they were living people, but when I accidentally walked through an ancestor doing the two-step, I quickly corrected my assumption. There was a couple "walking the dog" and a child doing the foxtrot. And, if that weren't wild enough, as if on cue, everybody started doing the Electric Slide. And I thought my parents' cookouts were bad.

"Are you seeing this?" I asked Granddad.

He didn't answer, which I took to mean that he wasn't. Unlike me, he didn't have an Isihlangu bead to give him the ability to perceive spirits. But then… I hadn't activated mine. So how was *I* seeing this?

"Tristan…" Granddad started.

I was so focused on moving through the spirits, I didn't hear the rest of what he said. I sidestepped a woman with a baby in her arms, then squeezed past a couple swaying gently from side to side. A mother and father held hands as their four children stood in front of them, youngest to oldest, two girls and two boys. None of them paid me any mind. It was like I was the ghost haunting their world. That's an unnerving feeling.

And then I spotted him—the boy from the French Quarter, trumpet to his lips and eyes closed as he walked through the ghostly crowd. I thought he might be a ghost as well until his foot kicked a pebble across the square. He was coming my direction, his fingers pressing the valves and his cheeks bulging as he played a sad song that captured the attention of the spirits. The boy moved closer and closer. I leaned out, ready to grab his arm.

Suddenly he stopped right in front of me, lowered the trumpet, and opened his eyes.

"Tristan Strong. Ça va? She said you'd be here," he said, looking directly at me. "She said she wanted to meet you herself, but ain't no time for that now. Follow me, s'il vous plaît. They're coming for the children."

I froze. "Uhhh…"

He stooped and set the trumpet on the ground. Then he swept off his hat, and microbraids tumbled down to coil on his—*her?*—shoulders.

"You're a girl!" I said, shocked.

He—I mean *she*—smirked and tucked her hat into the back pocket of her pants. "She said you were a little slow on the uptake at times. Guess she was right. Now… I told you. They're coming for the children, including your newcomers. They aim to take 'em. You gonna help clean up your mess, or will she need to find someone else?"

I shook my head, confused. "Who's 'she'? And who is 'they'? And who is—"

I didn't have time to finish. The strange girl let out a stream of exasperated words in a language I didn't understand and then stepped up close and dangled the SBP in front of me. "If you want this, follow me."

She turned and moved quickly toward the park's exit. I started after her, then remembered Granddad. I stopped and looked back at him. "The girl is

gonna give me back my phone," I told him. "She just wants to show us something first, okay?"

He hesitated, then waved me on. "You go ahead without me, boy. Those clam strips might be making a comeback. The hotel is that direction anyway. Just… hurry back, all right?"

I nodded, then took off. Granddad had become more trusting ever since I saved Nana. I just hoped his trust wasn't misplaced, because I had no idea what was going to happen next.

"Put some spice in your stride, boy—I might die!"

You know the worst thing about chasing after the girl who stole my phone? Listening to Anansi's color commentary as he critiqued my efforts. Seriously! You'd think he'd be a bit kinder to the person trying to rescue him from a stranger's clutches.

We'd raced up and down side streets and reentered the French Quarter. If trying to catch to up to the girl before had been difficult, now it seemed downright impossible. The crowds had grown in just the last thirty minutes, and, with the sun setting, it felt as if everybody in New Orleans—no, in the whole state of Louisiana—had decided to squeeze into these few city blocks.

And I was stuck trying to rescue an ungrateful trickster god who happened to be trapped in a magical phone that held the only clues to the whereabouts of the lost Alkean.

And people say I don't know how to have a good time.

"Tristan," Anansi said, his voice filtering through my earbuds, which were apparently still connected to the phone. Alkean reception was incredible. "I've saved my place in books faster than you're saving me. I've saved dances for that special someone faster than you're saving me. I've saved—"

"I wish you'd save your breath and be quiet!" I snarled.

A woman wearing five Mardi Gras bead necklaces and a feather crown looked at me as if I was talking to her, then frowned and stalked away in a huff, like I'd offended her. *I* should've been the offended one—who only wears five bead necklaces at the same time? She should've had at least fifteen by now.

I continued to pursue the mysterious girl. It was frustrating—with every second that elapsed, Cotton was surely wreaking havoc somewhere out

there. I had to end this, and fast.

We passed trinket shops and restaurants and bars swelling with customers. We passed closed museums and several ghost tours, and I wanted to shout at the tourists that the spirits were all around them… but I had to keep going. A giant church—the St. Louis Cathedral—towered overhead as we raced down the narrow street next to it and entered Jackson Square. As the girl dashed around people, they seemed to ignore her, whereas I had to shout "Excuse me!" every five seconds. It felt like I'd been running forever.

We crossed a wider street, and just when my lungs were about to turn in their two-week notice, she stopped in the middle of a giant field by the Mississippi River. As I hopped over the guide chains and approached her carefully, I saw a sign that read ARTILLERY PARK.

"You can hear them if you listen closely," she said, facing the river instead of me. She didn't even turn around when I moved within a few feet of her. The sounds of the Quarter faded behind us. A breeze came off the river, cooling the air.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Maybe just try to grab the SBP?" Anansi whispered in my earbud, but I ignored him. Something was happening, something strange, and if there was one thing I had learned this past summer, it was to stop and pay attention to the out-of-the-ordinary. It might just save a life.

"My name is Seraphine." She said it with a bit of an accent. Her microbraids rustled as she shot me a look, and then she returned to staring out at the water.

I squinted to see what she was looking at and did a double take. There was a barge on the horizon. One of those big boats that carries cargo containers. This one looked to be completely full.

Seraphine glanced at me, then returned her gaze to the boat. She wore a look of frustration, as if she'd expected something more and had been disappointed. "She said you defended your friends without hesitation. If you care half as much about saving the children as you do about your phone, we might stand a chance."

I stepped closer, trying to piece together the mystery in the girl's words. "We?"

"You and me. That's what she said."

I took another step closer. “Seraphine, I’m not sure what—or who—told you all this, but I really need my phone back. It’s…important.”

“Because of the god inside, n’est-ce pas?”

“I… Yes. But how do you know about Anansi?”

Seraphine turned to smile at me. “She makes it her business to know all the children who enter the city, as well as the people with power. And you, Tristan Strong, happen to be both. When she told me you’d arrived, I just knew you—and Anansi—would be able to help. We must free my siblings. The creatures… they bring the children here for loading. They do it under the cover of the song of the spirits so she can’t hear their cries.”

“Loading?”

The strange New Orleans girl pointed across the water to the barge. “Onto that.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. Who is taking children, and why? Have you called the police? The FBI?”

“They can’t help. No, it has to be us.”

I leaned forward and gently plucked the SBP from Seraphine’s grasp. She didn’t even notice, that’s how hard she was concentrating on the river. I began to back away slowly as Anansi motioned for me to hurry up. “Welp, I’m sorry to be a disappointment, but I really should find my granddad before he cleans the entire Quarter out of fried clam strips. It was nice to meet you, Seraphine, but let’s never do this—”

“But I thought you wanted to help your

friends?” I hesitated. “Excuse me?”

“Your friends. The one with the stones. The tiny angry one. And the cute girl with the bat.”

Anansi froze on the SBP’s screen. “Stones?”

“Cute girl… I mean, the girl with the bat?” I asked at the same time.

Seraphine nodded, then she fished around in her pocket, pulled out a wad of paper, and tossed it to me. I caught it and blushed furiously when I saw that the paper had her phone number on it. The wad held something inside it, too—a stone. I quickly stuffed the note in my pocket, steeling myself for Anansi’s teasing… but he’d gone silent. He was staring at the rock in my palm. When I looked at it closely, the breath slipped out of my lungs like they’d sprung a leak. Anansi took it even harder, slumping to the bottom of the screen and wrapping his two arms around all six legs.

It was a smooth, perfectly round stone. Black, flecked with silver and gold.

Junior had been here! And Ayanna and Gum Baby! But where were they now?

As if she'd heard the question, Seraphine pointed to the barge. "We don't have much time. She said your friends are walking into a trap. If we are going to act, it must be now, Tristan Strong."

Anansi met my eyes, all traces of the trickster gone, leaving only the hardened gaze of a god. Of a father. I sighed, then nodded and looked at Seraphine. Cotton could wait… For now.

"What do you need us to do?"

# 3
# THE RETURN

**FIVE MINUTES INTO THE RESCUE ATTEMPT, EVERYTHING DISSOLVED** into chaos.

Minute one:

The barge was anchored out in the middle of the Mississippi River. Which… I mean, have you seen that river? It's like an eight-lane expressway filled with mud and fish. In comparison, morning rush hour on the Dan Ryan freeway just outside Chicago seemed like a gentle crosswalk. Then there was the wind whipping up waves, making the river look like an ocean cutting through land… Look, I know being afraid of heights is supposed to be my thing, but choppy waves are a close second.

Anyway. TMI.

Seraphine and I scoured the shoreline for a stealthy way to reach the vessel, but the only thing we could find was a small warped wooden dinghy with no oars or motor to propel it forward.

Minute two:

As we were climbing into said dinghy, Anansi hissed into my ear, "Someone's coming." Seraphine looked at me strangely when I dropped into a crouch on the river side of the boat, but she followed my lead when I relayed Anansi's message.

“Let us hope it isn’t one of the river patrollers, or worse,” the girl said grimly. She met my inquisitive expression with a shake of the head. “She said foul things have been roaming the waterways as of late.”

“You keep saying ‘she said,’” I whispered. “Who are you talking about? Your mother?”

Seraphine smothered a laugh. She tilted the hat on her head jauntily. “You are not the only one who rides with a god, mon cher.”

Just then something rustled nearby. We tensed. I got Seraphine’s attention and mimed an attack, and she nodded. We crouched lower and waited for whoever it was to get a bit closer. We’d have one chance—if we didn’t take down our assailant quickly and quietly, the people on the barge would hear, and our one shot at surprise would be lost.

The rustling came nearer. And nearer.

And… “Now!” I shouted.

Seraphine and I leaped out at the same time. She went high and I dove low, intending to wrap my arms around the person’s legs while Seraphine quickly clamped a hand over their mouth. At least, that was the plan. Instead, something heavy whacked me across the shin, sending me tumbling head over heels in pain.

Dusk was throwing shadows on everything, so I couldn’t get a good look at our attacker’s face. I made a second rush at them, and again something swiped at me. This time I ducked, bobbing and weaving so I didn’t get hit, and then tackled the person hard to the ground.

“Who are you and why are you following us?” I hissed. I was angry. Impatient. My friends could be in trouble on that floating death trap, and here I was fighting a stranger. I was seconds away from squeezing my fists and unleashing the destructive power of the akofena shadow gloves on them when I saw Seraphine’s eyes widen. She stepped back.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

She didn’t respond. Instead, she simply released our captive, who looked at me with a familiar confused expression and a crumpled map in his hand.

“Is this part of the tour, too?” my cousin asked, his giant promotional pizza spatula in the dirt next to him.

I groaned. “Terrence, what are you doing here?”

The skinny nine-year-old wriggled out of my grasp and clutched his spatula to his chest. Gumbo stains covered his reunion T-shirt, and blades of grass were sticking out of his hair as he stood and looked around.

"You were supposed to give me a tour, remember?"

Terrence said. "How did you even find us?"

"We were on our way to get some beignets when I saw you run across the street. The line was out the door, so I decided to see what you were doing." He stared at Seraphine. "Who's this? Another cousin?"

I sighed. "No, she—"

"Your girlfriend?"

"No!"

Seraphine raised an eyebrow as Terrence nodded and said, "Another one who's outta your league, huh?"

I was just getting ready to launch myself at him again—and Terrence must have seen something in my eyes, because he yelped and scampered behind Seraphine—when a sharp cry pierced the night air. It came from the barge and carried across the river before it abruptly ended.

Someone was in pain.

"We do not have time for this," Seraphine said, her fists clenched. "We must figure a way across, and now."

I rubbed my hair in frustration, and then my eyes landed on Terrence. More specifically, on the pizza spatula he carried. It would be a perfect oar for the dinghy. We could paddle across, and no one would hear us coming. That is, if he'd let us have it.…

"Hey, Terrence…" I began.

His eyes flicked from mine to his spatula and back again, and he shook his head. "Nope, nuh-uh, don't even *think* about it."

"We just need it for an hour or so, and we'll bring it back good as new."

"Do you know what's in that water?" Terrence said, pointing at a piece of trash bobbing along the shoreline. "Look! That's a diaper! And you want to put my brand-new spatula in there? And look! Look at them. What are they doing?"

He was pointing at a pair of raccoons near the diaper. From here it looked like the bigger animal was trying to put it on the smaller one, and the little raccoon was attempting an escape. I didn't blame it. I wouldn't want to wear a soggy diaper, either.

I tried again. “Terrence, please, we need it. It’s important. A matter of life and death. People are relying on us, and if we can’t help them, something horrible might happen. So please. I’ll convince Granddad to buy you a new one. I promise.”

Terrence stared wide-eyed between Seraphine and me, then across the water to the barge, then back at me. He licked his lips.

Another cry echoed in the night.

“Terrence!” I said.

“Fine,” he said. I exhaled and was about to thank him when he raised a hand. “But only if I can come with you.”

I hesitated. That didn’t sound like a particularly good idea, but what other option did we have? Even now I could hear the barge engine revving up. In a few minutes it would move on, and then the children aboard, including Ayanna and Junior (and Gum Baby, I guess), would be trapped. I couldn’t let that happen. “Fine. But stay in the boat and don’t make a sound.”

Seraphine shook her head. “Un moment, s’il vous plaît. Tristan, are you sure? There is little room, and—”

But Terrence had already dashed past her and was helping to push the dinghy into the water. He hopped inside and I followed. After a moment, Seraphine climbed in with a look of reservation, but I knew she wanted to get to the barge as much as I did. I didn’t know what to expect once we got there, but I did know that I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt my friends. Not if I could do anything about it.

I had the magic of Alke on my side. What could go wrong?

I learned two things right away.

First, paddling a leaky dinghy across the Mississippi with a single pizza spatula was—believe it or not—not easy. For every foot we moved forward, we moved three feet downriver. The three of us took turns struggling against the current. Even though the surface looked calm, it felt like we were making no progress at all.

The lights of the French Quarter illuminated the western bank. I could see St. Louis Cathedral rising into the night, lit from below by the festivities going on around it. Somewhere in there the rest of the Strong family was eating, laughing, and partying. I just hoped we’d be able to sneak back and rejoin them later without any fuss.

The eastern bank of the river was shrouded in darkness. That was the side we wanted to approach the barge from, so no one would see us coming. And as we tried to paddle upriver around the vessel, I learned a second, very important fact that probably would've been good to know before setting out on this adventure.

Barges are huge. Super huge! "That's a long platform," I whispered to myself.

"They're not called platforms," Terrence said excitedly, forgetting that he wasn't supposed to be speaking. "They're barges, and when they're all connected like that, they're called the *tow*."

"A toe?" I asked.

"Like you're towing something, not what pokes through the hole in your sock. Not that I have any holes." This last comment was directed at Seraphine, who nodded gracefully at the pointless remark.

*Any*way.

Barge *tows* are huge covered *platforms* made of individual barges that, when linked together, can almost reach the size of a football field. They're pushed from the rear by one or two tugboats, blocky vessels with their wheelhouses situated high in the air. This barge only had one tugboat, and it was an ugly-looking thing. Smoke poured out of its lower deck, and the smell of diesel, sulfur, and mildewy socks drifted from it. And the bridge! The captain's compartment loomed like an angry cyclops in the cloudless night, and as we slowly made progress around the bow to the stern, the masthead light seemed to follow us, staring at me with a blistering red eye.

The enormity of the task quickly became clear. We had to sneak aboard, find our friends, and sneak back off without getting caught.

Easy, right?

Right.

Luckily for us, the sides of the barges weren't very high. I steered us toward a section where some netting dangled over the edge. After the dinghy bumped up alongside it, I extended the paddle to Terrence, and when he grabbed it, I wouldn't let go until he met my eyes.

"Don't leave the boat," I whispered. "Hang tight here, and we'll be right back."

He didn't look happy, but he nodded. I watched him for a second, then turned and followed Seraphine up the netting. She was already on the deck in a crouch, peeking around a rusted red cargo container. As I squatted next

to her, she glanced at me and frowned slightly. “You take a risk, Tristan Strong, bringing your family to your battles. Aren’t you worried he will be caught in the crossfire?”

I reached for the adinkra bracelet on my right wrist. Dangling from it were my gifts from the gods. The Anansi symbol. The akofena from High John. The Gye Nyame charm. The Amagqirha’s spirit bead from Isihlangu. They gave me strength, power, and right now, all the confidence I needed. My heart beat double time in my chest, and I could barely restrain myself from sprinting toward the tugboat and demanding the release of my friends.

“He’ll be fine,” I managed to say. “Let’s go.”

The individual barges were connected by thick rusty chains hooked onto giant metal pegs. I stared at one and shuddered, resolving not to look at them again if I didn’t have to. They reminded me too much of the giant bossling iron monsters I had battled back in Alke. We hopped over them, skulking in the shadows of the containers as we moved to the next barge along the tow.

“What do you think’s inside these?” I whispered.

“Normally?” Seraphine thought for a second. “I think grain, or chemicals. But…” Her voice trailed off, and then she turned and jogged to the rear of the container we were hiding behind. She stopped at the doors and started wresting the giant bolt pin from the lock.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

The pin squeaked loose, and Seraphine swung the giant door open. She nodded grimly, then jerked her head at the inside. “It is as I thought. Empty. The barges seemed to be riding high in the water, and it’s because they carry nothing.”

“Where are the children?” I asked. “And my friends?”

Seraphine looked around uneasily. “I do not like this, Tristan. She said the children would be here. She’s never wrong.”

As we moved to the next barge in the row, I kept turning my head like a periscope. A feeling of unease worked itself up my spine and into my brain, until all I could think about was the lack of anything we’d expected to see. It didn’t make sense!

“Let’s check the tugboat,” I whispered. I led the way across the third barge, water splashing up between the gaps and tow chains clinking eerily in the dark, toward the boat idling at the rear. I thought it was my imagination, but as we got closer, the light seemed to shrink around us, until

the world beyond the barge didn't exist. It was just the two of us creeping through the night, the sound of my breath carrying on the breeze.

We jumped from the final barge to the prow of the tugboat. The deck vibrated under our feet. Seraphine elbowed me and pointed upward without speaking. A light still flickered at the very top of the boat, up in the wheelhouse. We looked at each other, then at the door leading inside, and I took a step forward.

"Wait," Seraphine said in a low voice, grabbing my arm.

"Listen." "For what?"

"Shh…" She cocked an ear, then turned on a dime and began to sprint back toward the barge we'd just left. I followed, confused. The feeling that I was being watched intensified as we sped away from the tugboat, and I checked over my shoulder.

Just for a moment, it looked as if someone was standing in the bridge window.

But that was pushed from my mind as I finally heard what Seraphine had. Knocking was coming from one of the containers to our left. Someone was trapped inside!

I skidded to a stop in front of the container doors and began to help Seraphine yank the bolt pin free. It was partially rusted and somewhat bent, but after several attempts we finally managed to remove the iron rod. I tossed it behind me.

"Ow!"

I whirled around to see Terrence standing there, his pizza spatula cradled in one arm as his left hand vigorously rubbed his shoulder. "You hit me!" he accused.

I pointed at him. "You were supposed to stay in the dinghy!"

"Y'all were taking too long," he whined. "And I kept hearing weird noises. When can we go back, Tristan? I don't like this."

"In a second. We just—"

Seraphine finally got the door to the container unstuck, and it creaked open with a loud squeal that made everyone flinch. I took a step forward, eager to see who we had rescued. Ayanna? Junior, maybe? That would make Anansi happy. Maybe some of the children Seraphine and her boss were searching for would be inside as well. We all rushed in…

And stopped.

"Empty?" Terrence said. "You did all this for nothing?"

Seraphine took another step, then paused, lifting her shoe to study something.

"You okay?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Fine. Just stepped in something sticky." I paused. "What did you say?"

"I just stepped in something sticky, almost like…"

I closed my eyes in pain as a shout echoed in the container, high-pitched and very, very loud.

"Well, look what the sap dragged in!"

Three things are certain in life. Death, taxes (from what I've heard), and Gum Baby appearing when she's least expected, not needed, and silence is preferred. Gum Baby didn't do silence. At all. In fact, I was pretty sure Gum Baby only had two volume options—loud and obnoxiously loud.

Still, I had to fight back a smile when the tiny terror, master of the sapback, and self-proclaimed heroine of Alke, Gum N. B. Baby, emerged from the shadows of the cargo container and stood glaring up at us with her hands on her hips. She wore her trademark black turtleneck, black pants, and tiny shoes that I always bit my tongue to keep from calling doll-like. Had she drawn her version of the Chuck Taylor emblem on them? Wow. Anyway. Her hair was in cornrows that swept diagonally across her head and ended in braids that alternated between red, black, and green beads, and green, yellow, and red beads.

"Well?" Gum Baby demanded. "You all get a good look? Memorized Gum Baby's style? Good. Gum Baby's tired of all y'all dragging down her vibe. Maybe she'll rub off on your fashion sense. Especially you, Bumbletongue. Surprised you ain't in a hoodie. Don't your suit jackets have hoods, too? Glad to see you switch it up now and then."

I rolled my eyes and stepped back. "It's good to see you, too, Gum Baby."

The little loudmouth scrambled up to stand on my shoulder as she peered suspiciously at my family reunion T-shirt. "The things Gum Baby has to put up with to get the job done. Gum Baby once had her own boat in Alke, and now she's back where she started, on a Bumbletongue steed. And the one time she could've used one of your raggedy pouches, you fail her—again! How the mighty have fallen." And yet, even as she complained, she

nestled down and looked around. “Well? Introduce Gum Baby! Stop being rude, thistle-head.”

Seraphine, her eyes twinkling, dropped into a curtsy. “She already told me of the mighty Gum Baby. Bonjour, mon ami. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Seraphine.”

Terrence, eyes wide, just waved at the talking doll.

“That’s my cousin, Terrence,” I said.

Gum Baby eyed him, then sniffed and nodded. “Gum Baby gonna have her work cut out for her if she gotta look after *two* Bumbletongues. But maybe she can sap out the bad habits in this younger one. You beyond saving, big head. Gum Baby just gotta live with it. She failed you.”

Terrence snickered, and I cleared my throat. “Can we get back to business, please? Gum Baby, what are you doing here? There were supposed to be children…. Where’d they go? And where’s Ayanna and Junior?”

Gum Baby shrugged. “The name is Gum Baby, not Gum Babysitter. Wasn’t no kids on this boat, and Gum Baby been waiting here for a week. So, as usual, Gum Baby don’t know what you talking about. She’s got her mission, and that’s it.”

I growled something that I don’t think I should repeat, but before I could continue to argue, Seraphine addressed Gum Baby. “Pardonnez-moi, but you say you are here on a mission? What were you waiting for?”

Gum Baby swept her braids back behind her shoulder. “Weeeeeell, since you asked so nicely, Gum Baby’s setting a trap for a ghostie.”

“A ghostie?”

She nodded. “Gum Baby’s been following it for some time. Gum Baby almost had it, but it escaped. Ayanna and Spider-Boy are back upriver.” Gum Baby looked worried all of a sudden. “Maybe. Everyone got separated after the ghostie attacked.”

Terrence, who was shuffling his feet nervously behind me, peeked around and worked up the nerve to ask a question. “What does this ghostie look like?”

Gum Baby flashed an evil grin. “No one’s ever seen it completely, because it’s covered in a dirty, tattered cloak. But it glides around like a bat, and it shrieks like Bumbletongue did that one time he thought a wasp was chasing him.”

“That wasp was huge!” I snapped.

Terrence bit his lip. “Does… does this ghostie walk on all fours sometimes?”

Gum Baby tilted her head as she thought. “Now that you mention it… Gum Baby doesn’t know. Gum Baby don’t keep manuals on terrifying creatures. Although…” She broke off and slid down to the deck, where she sat with her chin on a fist.

“That’s really specific,” I said to Terrence, pulling my gaze away from the tiny terror. “Why would you ask that?”

He pointed behind us, toward the tugboat. At first I couldn’t see anything but shadows… until I looked up and saw a long, lanky creature scuttling down from the top of the wheelhouse like a monstrous crab. A shrieking cry that scraped at my bones filled the night.

“Because it’s right there!” Terrence shouted.

# 4
# CATCH A FIRE

**I WANTED TO FIGHT**.

The anger that had been simmering within me as of late was trying to bubble up to the surface. It was as if rage were flowing through my arteries instead of blood, fire was filling my lungs instead of oxygen, and at any given moment the two were going to mix and I would explode in a fury. It terrified me.

Not the potential loss of control.

No, I was terrified of how excited I was about releasing that rage.

"Come on!" I shouted at the creature, squeezing my fists. Four silver-black boxing gloves, with silver fire rippling around them, appeared in midair, two on either side of me. I scrambled up the ladder of the nearest container—a long orange metal box with stickers slapped all over it—and stood on the ridged top. Everything faded away—the lights of New Orleans's French Quarter across the river, the tugboat behind me, the past, and the future. It was just me and my opponent, and I could feel my anger taking over.

This was a haint! One of Cotton's minions. Something to be defeated, to be pummeled, to unleash my pent-up frustration on. Whatever its intent, it was going down tonight.

The monster dropped to the other end of the container with a violent *thud*, jostling the nearby barges and shaking the whole network. Slowly, it stood upright, until it towered over me on two twisted limbs that were wrapped with strips of the same material its cloak was made out of. The hood was pulled down low, so I couldn't see its face, but sibilant whispers emerged from within, like a chorus of snakes hungry for my defeat.

Well, I wasn't going anywhere.

I opened my mouth to shout at it again, but another voice cut me off. "YEAH, CHUMP, YOU REMEMBER GUM BABY? ROUND TWO, THISTLE-HEAD. COME GET SOME! THIS MOVIE IS RATED G FOR *GUM BABY*, SO COME SEE THESE HANDS!"

Gum Baby stood on my shoulder, her hands filled with sap, a scowl on her face. And you know what? I wasn't even mad. For once I agreed with the tiny terror's aggression. Let the creature learn that it chose the wrong ones to fight today.

The haint leaned forward and shrieked that same wordless scream that Seraphine and I had heard on the other side of the river. So it hadn't been a child in pain—it was a lure. My teeth squeaked as I ground them together. All right, I was here now, and I wasn't leaving without a fight.

Another shriek, and this time I screamed back at it, my own wordless expression of rage. Gum Baby shouted a high-pitched challenge, too, and together we were louder than the monster could ever hope to be. The haint dropped to all fours and scuttled forward. I didn't wait for it to arrive—I lunged, bringing the pain with me.

We clashed in a maelstrom of fists and sap and claws.

The monster attacked with all four limbs, whirling and spinning, stabbing and swiping with lethal intent. It took all my boxing training to dodge the blows. I silently thanked Granddad for all of those drills he'd put me through, from forbidding me to use my hands to block attacks to forcing me to bob and weave at the end of every training session when I was drained and exhausted. Right now, they were the only things saving my life.

But I was attacking, too. The shadow gloves flashed in and out, jabs and straights, hooks and uppercuts. Gum Baby flipped from my left shoulder to my right and back again, hurling sap balls and insults with equal intensity. I dodged a slicing strike, slipped a bull rush, and turned and fired three punches at the back of the haint.

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

It stumbled, but before I could celebrate, the monster spun around and sent an attack whipping toward my chest. I tried to duck its limbs, but they crashed into my shoulder and I went tumbling, barely staying on the top of the container. Gum Baby leaped off me and fired a barrage of sap at the creature before flipping backward, but she was a tad slow. Another attack clipped her, sending the tiny heroine rolling toward me. I managed to grab her before she fell off the side, and we stood together. The haint shrieked again. I was breathing heavily, and it barely looked winded.

It took a step forward, then jerked up short. One corner of its cloak had become stuck to the container surface. Gum Baby's barrage had found its mark. I smiled. "Yeah, now what, buddy? Your move."

The haint turned to examine the sap trap as it tried to pull free. The cloak strained, then slowly, loudly, it began to tear.

*R-I-I-I-P.*

The smile faded from my face as the creature revealed itself. "What is that?" Gum Baby asked. "I thought it was a ghostie?" "Seraphine!" I called, taking a step back. But she wasn't the one who responded.

"I know what it is!" Terrence shouted. He'd climbed halfway up the ladder and now peered over the top of the container. "It's a coffle!"

I glanced at him, then stared back at the monster. It was shaking itself, as if it had just shed its skin and felt renewed. It *did* have a head, just like none I'd ever seen before. Two long, wooden, bone-like structures protruded from the opposite sides of a loop, forming what looked like the skull of a hammerhead shark. Its body was a chain, and its four limbs were thorny, viny branches. With a loud *crack*, the branches snapped in two, then in two again, and so on, until sixteen crab-like legs made of splintered wood clattered on the metal cargo container top.

"A what?" I called over my shoulder.

"A coffle! I saw it on the plantation tour…. You know, the one you missed?"

"Terrence!"

"Sorry! They were used to fasten slaves together when they were marched from the house to the fields and back."

"Um…" Seraphine said from below. She crouched in the narrow alley formed by the containers behind us. She appeared to be setting up

something on the deck of the barge, but I couldn't make out what it was. "Can you spare us the history lesson until we've escaped?"

I licked my lips as I faced the twisted wood-and-iron creature. There was no way I could dodge that many limbs. I'd be skewered. The first rule of fighting monsters (I had two): Choose your battleground carefully. Too open and you can get overwhelmed on all sides and end up sinking beneath a swarm of opponents. John Henry taught me that when he and I defended the Thicket in MidPass from iron monsters. I'd forgotten to do that when I faced the Kulture Vulture in the mud outside the City of Lakes, and I'd nearly paid the price. I was determined never to make that mistake again, and seeing Seraphine working below gave me an idea.

"Go back down!" I shouted to Terrence. "Get between the containers. We'll lose it on the barges!" At least I hoped we would. The creature looked too big to be able to maneuver easily between the narrow corridors. And maybe, if we were lucky, it would fall between the barges and get swept away by the Mississippi.

Hey, you have to speak your dreams into existence.

And if somehow we turned the tables and got the jump on the monster, the akofena shadow gloves had all the firepower I needed to even the odds, sixteen serrated wooden limbs or no.

"Move it!" I shouted, and Gum Baby, who'd been rolling a ball of sap twice as large as her usual projectiles in her hands, jumped off the container and scampered away. I leaped down to the deck of the barge, caught my balance, and took off down an aisle. I heard the coffle's footsteps (Limbsteps? Branchsteps?) as it raced along the container tops. I risked a glance back and immediately regretted it. It sped forward like a cross between a scorpion and a crab, its legs jutting out at sharp angles, the remainder of the shredded cloak flapping in its wake like tattered streamers. The dark, knotted limbs reminded me of something, and when I realized what it was, my breath caught in my throat.

The Shamble Man.

My last opponent, one I'd failed to beat on my own. Right now, the Shamble Man, aka Bear, was on my grandparents' farm, recovering from the poison he had absorbed by wearing King Cotton's mask. I'd only been able to defeat the enraged bear with the help of several goddesses—Lady Night, Keelboat Annie, and Mami Wata—all of whom were keeping an eye on him back in Alabama.

Whoever or whatever *this* monster was, the coffle, it was something new.

Fine. It had been a while since I'd a chance to hit something.

Except I'd forgotten the second rule of fighting monsters. (Remember I said I had two? It's okay if you forgot, too. Happens to the best of us.) It is: As a hero, you're responsible for the crew you brought with you to the fight.

"Tristan!"

And as I skidded to a stop, I remembered too late the one person who couldn't defend himself.

The coffle stood over Terrence and shrieked.

Terrence was huddled in a ball on the deck of the barge tow. Only the narrow confines of the space had prevented him from immediately becoming a Strong kebab. The coffle hovered above, several sharp legs questing for the nine-year-old while the rest of them kept its body balanced as it straddled two containers. The monster raised one limb, ready to stab downward, when a large disc of sap slammed into the right side of its head. I turned to see Gum Baby prepping another sticky Frisbee by rolling a giant ball of sap and jumping on it to flatten it down. She then picked up the projectile with both hands, spun in a circle like an Olympic discus thrower, and hurled it at the haint.

The coffle shrieked as the sap disc crashed through three of its legs and it reeled backward. Gum Baby flapped a hand at me. "Don't just stand there, *do* something!"

I shook my head to snap myself out of my frozen funk, then looked around for an object to throw as well.

"Tristan, help!"

Terrence was now trapped behind a thicket of sharp wooden legs…. How was I supposed to free him? If only I'd had High John's ax, or John Henry's hammer… But de Conquer hadn't been seen since we fled Alke, and the hammer was the whole reason Alke had blown apart. It had probably shattered into a million pieces that were floating through a million dimensions.

Just then Terrence met my eyes, his own streaming tears as a monster he could have only conjured in his nightmares terrorized him in real life. My indecisiveness hardened into anger, then fury, and then rage. I screamed a

wordless challenge and rushed the coffle before my brain could convince me that it was a horrible idea. I didn't care. Let whatever might come, come. Never let it be said Tristan Strong waited for a fight. Tell them I took the fight to my opponents.

*SMASH!*

I crashed into several of the haint's legs with a shoulder charge, then stepped back and dropped into a crouch. With a squeeze of my fists, the shadow gloves rippled into existence. Except this time I couldn't stop squeezing. I was just so… angry! I clenched my fists so hard that my nails dug into my palms and I thought I might start bleeding.

The two sets of boxing gloves trembled. Slowly they moved closer together on either side of me, the top pair descending to meet the ascending bottom pair. When they finally touched, they merged in a flash of shadow and black flame. Now there were only two gloves instead of four, but the silver fire that rippled along the outside of them began to change. They grew darker and darker until they were a glittering black blaze. The gloves flared up on either side of me, framing my vision. A tunnel of fire. Good. That's how I felt.

"Keep punching," I said through gritted teeth, and sent a right hook whistling at the coffle.

The shadow gloves battered seven limbs aside. Even more important, the coffle's wooden legs began to burn with black fire. The creature took several steps back, but I continued to swing. Left. Right. Hook. Straight. I wanted to make it pay for what it had done. What it was doing. I heard faint shouts, but the outside world was far away. It was just me and the coffle. And only one of us was going to walk away from this.

Left jab. Left uppercut.

Every punch was a statement. My hands were doing the talking for me, and every word they spoke was the answer to an unasked question.

*Bam!* That was for the terror that Cotton and his minions, like the coffle, had inflicted on others.

*Bam!* That was for the pain and the suffering.

*Bam!* That was for the missing children we still hadn't found.

*Bam!* And that was for making me afraid again. The only way to suppress my fear was to swamp it with anger, so I hit and hit and hit and—

"Tristan?"

Terrence's voice finally slipped through to my ears. I looked up just in time to see the twisted chain torso of the coffle collapse to the ground in a charred pile. I stood there, my chest heaving and my hands on my knees as I tried to gulp down air. After a few seconds I looked around for everyone else.

Terrence sat in the middle of a circle of smoking splinters. Gum Baby stood next to Seraphine, and both of them were watching me warily. My cousin didn't look at me at all.

"What's the matter?" I asked. I stepped forward, then paused when they flinched.

"Tristan—" Seraphine began, but Gum Baby cut her off.

"Turn off the fires, Burning Boy!" she shouted. "You gonna light up this whole place!"

*Burning Boy?* I stared at her, then looked down, confused. Sure enough, I was on fire. The black flames from the shadow gloves now covered my hands and wrists, even though the gloves themselves had disappeared when I unclenched my fists. And the flames were slowly rising up my arms.

"What do I do?" I asked, panicking. I'd never been on fire before. Wasn't it supposed to hurt? I couldn't feel a thing, but I still flailed my arms, trying to extinguish the blaze. Unfortunately, all that did was send black sparks to the barge deck, where, to my horror, they coalesced, turning into an inferno that I could definitely feel this time. It was like once the flames left my body they became real, and they were more dangerous than any I'd seen before.

The blaze spread rapidly. Seraphine scooped up Gum Baby and began to retreat. Terrence followed, his eyes wide and his pizza spatula clutched tight to his chest. No one looked at me as they ran past. I jogged after them, still confused and panicking because the flames on my arms wouldn't extinguish. And every time I brushed against something—a barge tie, a container wall, anything!—it caught fire. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to go back to the city. What if I set New Orleans on fire? And I couldn't get into the dinghy—it was made of wood! Maybe I'd just float on the Mississippi forever, doomed to remain in the water in case I—

"Watch out!"

Seraphine's scream brought me up short, and I skidded to a stop behind to the others, careful to remain a few feet away so I didn't burn them. Not

that it mattered, because directly in front of us, like an angry zombie phoenix risen from the ashes, the coffle reared its ugly head.

The monster emerged from the flames shrieking a battle cry. Nearly all of its legs were gone, and it trembled on the three remaining ones like a twisted tripod. Its chain torso smoked, and one side of its restraint-head had burned away. Bits of singed cloak floated off over the water like ash as it clattered forward, desperate to get to us.

Flames blocked our retreat.

And a monster blocked our escape.

I raised my fists, then hesitated as flames continued to ripple up toward my elbows. But I had to fight… didn't I?

The coffle shrieked again and lunged forward…

… only to be knocked down by a giant wave. Somehow, the water missed the rest of us completely. Once it receded, a slim Black woman with long locs that drifted in the air behind her stepped onto the barge. She raised her hands and a second blast of water sent the coffle careening off the barge and down into the depths of the Mississippi. The woman watched it drown, then turned to fix a fierce glare on me.

"You," Mami Wata said, "are in big trouble."

# 5
# LECTURES AND WARNINGSSS

**THE WORST LECTURE I EVER SAT THROUGH HAPPENED TWO DAYS** after my best friend died. I'd decided to skip English class. I don't remember actually making the choice—it was more a gradual realization that I didn't want to move from the stall in the boys' bathroom I'd locked myself in. I guess I was angry at the world and whoever had decided to put someone as funny and understanding as Eddie on the planet just to take him away. That was before I'd started therapy, before Mr. Richardson had taught me how to work through the feeling that everything was spiraling out of control, before he showed me the "Angry Octopus" technique, and before I even knew of a place called Alke. Back then it was just me and my anger.

I thought I would explode if I left that stall. So I didn't.

When Mrs. Flowers, the assistant principal, found me after school nearly two hours later, she took me to her office, where my mother was waiting. I thought Mom was gonna be furious, but instead there was disappointment in her eyes, which was ten times as bad. To make matters worse, she pulled out her phone, called Dad, and put him on speaker. Everyone in the office heard the lecture on responsibility and grief he gave me. I was mortified.

That was THE WORST scolding I can remember.

Until now.

"What were you thinking?" Mami Wata asked me.

It was the next evening. I'd slept through the remainder of the previous night and most of the day and still felt exhausted. Letting out that much anger, fighting with the new shadow gloves—it had taken its toll. Thankfully, the flames had disappeared once I calmed down. Now the only things burning were the questions everyone had.

We were gathered in a long, elegantly furnished ship's cabin with plush couches, fancy throw pillows (which, despite what their name implied, you weren't supposed to touch, let alone throw), and a small marble bathtub in the corner filled with bright jewel-like fish. Skylights opened to the starry night, and more fish flashed in glass aquariums built into the walls. I sat in a tall, polished wooden chair with a soft velvet pillow covered in with golden embroidery. Seriously, it was the fanciest room I'd ever been in, and I'd visited the houses of Dad's heavyweight-champion friends.

Then again, how would you expect a goddess to travel? In a water taxi? Don't be silly.

No, we were all aboard the *River Queen*, a gorgeous paddle steamship with mermaid carvings on the side of the hull. On any other day, I'd be thrilled to travel around in luxury like this.

"I don't think the boy was thinking at all," said a disappointed voice from a chair across the room.

Like I said, we were all aboard the steamship. Almost all of us. Seraphine had slipped away in the chaos, saying she already had one god to report to. I never did find out who that god was, but I envied her ability to escape. The *River Queen* currently carried Gum Baby, John Henry, Nyame, and Mami Wata… as well as every single member of the Strong family reunion. Most of my cousins, aunts, and uncles were downstairs, where a DJ who looked suspiciously like a boar in a tracksuit and bucket hat was playing all the latest hits.

Apparently, after Nana and Granddad received a message from Mami Wata to meet her at the boat, they had rushed to the banks of the Mississippi River with all the relatives in tow. (You can't say my family won't ride for one of their own.) Somehow Mami Wata managed to convince my cousins and aunts and uncles that they'd won a night aboard a luxury river yacht,

and now they were living their best life. I could hear happy chatter and laughter filtering through the windows.

But a few Strongs were in the suite with me. Terrence, who hadn't relinquished his death grip on the pizza spatula despite everyone's best efforts, shivered on a couch in the corner. Granddad sat beside him, one arm thrown over my cousin's shoulder, watching the proceedings. But it was the third Strong who had just spoken, and I looked over to meet my nana's eyes. She wasn't scowling, but she was nowhere near happy.

My grandmother shifted in her seat, the knitting in her lap untouched, and held my gaze. "What you did was foolish and dangerous. Dozens of people could've been hurt, Tristan. *Dozens.* Including your own family and friends. Why would you do something so reckless?"

"Not to mention nearly getting yourself killed." Anansi's voice was quiet, and yet the trickster god's words reached every ear in the room. Granddad had propped up the phone on a seat nearby, and Anansi sat on an app icon in the middle of the screen, his head bowed as he studied his hands. "You can't hurl yourself into battle after battle as if you're invincible, boy. Value your life. And the lives of those that follow you. Don't throw their sacrifices away."

He didn't say it outright, but I knew he was talking about Junior. Something had changed between Anansi and me ever since his son had stayed behind to battle Bear, sacrificing himself to give me and others a chance to escape. The spider god had become more withdrawn. Quieter. Less tricky, and that was perhaps most worrisome of all.

"Anansi—" I began to say, but Gum Baby cut me off. To my surprise, she did it in my defense.

"Before you adults with your big selves get to yelling at Bumbletongue too much, none of y'all came to help Gum Baby." The sticky doll (don't tell her I called her that) sat in her own chair, her tiny legs kicking in the air as she leaned against on the seat cushion behind her. "Gum Baby was in that container for a week. A *week*! Nothing to do but listen to the ghostie moan and wail and hiss about being stuck on the barge while the others got to have fun. Gum Baby tried to start a bee log, but she couldn't find any logs in the container, and bees don't like the river. How she supposed to get followers if ain't no bees on the river?"

She stopped to take a breath and looked around. Everyone in the room stared at her, confused.

I sighed. What did it say about me that I'd understood everything she'd just said? "She tried to start a *blog*."

Granddad, who was taking all this in stride way better than I ever would've expected, cleared his throat. "You sayin' she was doing one of them internet video diaries?"

"No, that's a *vlog*," John Henry boomed from his spot on the floor, arms folded behind his head. "Vee-log. Gum Baby's talking about a *blog*, short for *web log*." He lifted his shoulders when I looked at him in surprise. "Had to find something to do while I got my feet back under me. Started digging around the web."

Nana wrinkled her brow. "Ain't a web log the thing those space warp captains do at the beginning of each episode?"

This was getting out of hand. "Nana," I said, "that's a captain's log, from *Star Trek*. But that's besides the point. Gum Baby, what did you mean when you said the coffle complained about 'others'? What others?"

Gum Baby shrugged. "Gum Baby ain't take notes. All she knows is the ghostie kept hissing about orders from the boss and saying it wasn't fair. But what wasn't fair was Gum Baby having to come up with five or six content posts before even launching her bee log. Gum Baby ain't a planner! She's more of an off-the-cuff, spontaneous entertainer. So maybe bee-logging ain't for Gum Baby. Maybe a late-night talk show?"

At some point you just have to turn away and let her ramble on her own. I looked at Anansi, who'd gone still at the mention of a boss, and when I scanned the room, every one of the Alkeans was looking at me. There was only one person the boss could be, and technically he wasn't a person, he was a haint. It was time to come clean.

"Cotton," I said aloud, and the room darkened briefly as the lights flickered.

"That thing from the mask?" Mami Wata asked.

"The haint inside the Maafa?" John Henry said at the same time.

Gum Baby stopped kicking and shuddered. Out of everyone in the room—in fact, out of everyone from Alke and this world—Gum Baby was the only one besides me who'd actually laid eyes on the king of haints himself.

I looked around the suite. "Yes. To both questions. But even more importantly, he's here. In New Orleans."

Everyone started talking at once. John Henry wanted to form a search party, while Nyame demanded a meeting with the leaders of the city to plan

what to do next. Granddad wanted to go back to the hotel and negotiate a discounted rate for haint hazard, while Nana just sat there and knitted thoughtfully. Finally Mami Wata had to make a sharp gesture with her hands, and the lights flared bright turquoise for a moment. Everybody fell silent.

"Tristan," Mami Wata said, moving closer. "How do you know Cotton is here?"

I swallowed.

The image of the haint strolling through the French Quarter lingered at the forefront of my mind. I wasn't worried about myself so much, but about everyone else. I mean, some of the Alkeans weren't back up to full health yet. John Henry was still recovering from nearly disappearing after Bear attacked him with his own hammer. And then there was Nana and Granddad, and my other relatives. I only had to look at Terrence, still shivering on the couch, to know that I couldn't risk any of them getting hurt.

"Tristan?" Mami Wata prodded.

I shook my head. "Like Gum Baby said, the coffle said 'the boss' was nearby. And I thought I saw him in the French Quarter today. If we move quickly, we can—"

"We?" Nana looked up from her knitting. "Ain't no *we*, baby. You're staying put."

"But Cotton—" I started to protest.

"Isn't what you need to be worried about," Granddad said. "Listen to your grandmother. You've done enough. Let others help sometimes, boy. You can't do it all."

Nyame, standing at the window, nodded suddenly and turned around and addressed the other gods and goddesses. "The sun's completely set. If we are to act, the time is now."

Wait a minute. "Act?" I asked.

"You aren't the only one tracking the haint," Mami Wata said. "We've been keeping an eye out for nearly a week now. And if he's here, you're not safe. So, from now on, you will be confined to quarters. I took the liberty of arranging it with your grandparents while you were sleeping."

"What?" I looked at Granddad and Nana. They nodded.

Nana leaned forward. "Tristan, honey, this is serious. Your grandfather and I have been talking—"

Granddad placed a hand on her arm, then sighed. “We’ve been talking, boy, and I hate to say it, but it might be… safer if you rode up north with Mami Wata while we stay in the city a little longer for the reunion. And she’s gonna watch over your phone for a while, too.”

“That’s not fair!” I said, almost shouting. They were essentially grounding me!

Nana stood and walked over. She patted me on the shoulder and said, “Dear, life isn’t fair. But I want you to keep yours as long as possible, so I’m gonna put you out of harm’s way until this all blows over. Mami Wata said you could have one of the cabins on the *River Queen*. You’ll be traveling in style.”

Nana stroked my cheek as Granddad followed Nyame and John Henry out, one of his arms draped around Terrence’s shoulders. Then she headed for the door herself. “A little bit of Alke goes a long way, so just stay on the boat and relax. Focus on dealing with that anger inside you. Ain’t no good gonna come until you do.”

With that, she was out the door as well, following the rest of the Strongs and Alkean gods to the dock. And with no children rescued, my friends still missing, and Cotton somewhere out there, I was left alone with the horrible feeling that I’d let everyone down.

Well, not totally alone.

“So how can Gum Baby get her own paddleboat?” The miniature messy marauder had scrambled up to one of the windows and was peering out at the steamship’s giant paddle. It splashed and churned through the water as the vessel slowly beat against the strong current, just trying to stay in place. Gum Baby continued to lay out reasons she deserved her own steamship and the extensive list of names she would give it (*Gumming Around the Mountain*, the HMS *Gum Baby*, and her personal favorite, *Sun’s Out, Gum’s Out*), but I couldn’t focus.

Grounded! How could they ground me? I was only doing my job. You know, trying to catch a haint and save the free world as we knew it. Far be it from me to try to keep everyone safe. I shook my head and folded my arms across my chest. Grounded. *Pfft.* Fine, whatever. At least I wouldn’t have to participate in the annual Strong family karaoke contest. In fact—

*SPLASH!*

When I looked up, the window was empty. “Gum Baby?” I called.

Nothing.

I got up and walked over, grumbling the whole time. “Seriously, if this is another one of your sap experiments gone wrong, like the sap balloons, or the sap traps you hid in my brand new Grape 5s that one time, I’m gonna tell Nyame who’s been drinking his sun tea. And you *know* how possessive he gets about that.”

I looked up into the rafters of the cabin. You never knew with Gum Baby. Sometimes she liked to drop down on me from the ceiling like a bull rider into the chute and shout *Go, Bumbly Steed!* while kicking her heels. No joke.

But she wasn’t there.

“I’m not playing. Gum Baby?” I reached the window and leaned out cautiously, peering upward first. She could be on the deck above, ready to pounce on me. But the only thing I saw was the night sky, the moon partially hidden by a bank of clouds. I pursed my lips, then looked down and froze before slowly backing away, my pulse racing and my mouth dry.

A giant snake, black as the night outside, eyes bright yellow with emerald-green pupils, slithered through the window and into the suite. It moved in shallow curves, winding from side to side around the chairs and the room’s support pillars. Its head was the size of my own, and even before all of its body was inside, it lifted its front several feet off the floor and stared me in the eyes.

“Sssalutationsss, mortal. Another of the Lady’sss straysss, hmm?” Its tongue flicked out every other word, tasting the air and creeping me out at the same time. Not because I haven’t seen a snake do that before, but, you know, because *it was talking to me!* It had a drawl, too, I noticed. A low, humming twang with a lot of bass in the voice.

I retreated even farther into the room, looking for an escape.

“What’sss the matter, boy?” the snake said. “Cat sssnake got your tongue?”

My fists began to squeeze. I wanted to call forth the shadow gloves to defend myself, to punch the snake back out the window in a blaze of flames.

Flames.

The image of the black fire creeping up my arm flashed in front of my eyes, and my fingers uncurled. No. Terrence’s look of terror after I’d

pulverized the coffle still haunted me. And Cotton's words lingered in the back of my head. *You know this ain't over, right?*

The snake cocked its head as it swayed from side to side. "Wait… I know you. Yesss, you're the boy all the ssspiritsss are in such a tizzy about. The ssstoryteller. A modern-day bayou griot, they sssay. Trissstan, am I right?" My name lingered in the air as the snake slithered closer. "Well, then, ss-since the boss isssn't here, you'll have to deliver the messsage to her, ssstoryteller."

"A snake," I finally said. You'd think, after a summer of discovering a whole world filled with magic, folk heroes, and my own ability to interact with both, I'd be prepared for anything, but somehow I just never thought a giant snake was in the cards for me.

"Sssorry?"

"A snake," I repeated. "I'm talking to a snake. Is that… Am I supposed to be doing that?"

The giant reptile let out a long exasperated hiss and shook its head from side to side. "Sssee, thisss isss what I'm talking about. One of my cousssinsss makesss it to the big ssscreen and sssuddenly all talking sssnakesss are evil. I tried to tell him not all represssentation is good represssentation, you know?"

I nodded along, not sure what to do other than keep it talking.

"But I digresss…. You must passs the messsage to the bosss, understand?"

"What message?" My voice croaked. The snake nearly filled the room now, and it still wasn't completely inside yet. More and more of it coiled inside through the window, and a bead of sweat rolled down my forehead and dropped to the ground.

"Normally I'd follow protocol and ssspeak only to the bosss, but dessperate timesss and all that." The snake eyed me up and down. "Dessperate indeed."

"Hey!"

"Relax, boy, jussst a joke. Heroes are so tesssty thessse daysss. Not like before. But sssince you're here and Maman de l'Eau isssn't, sssit up and pay attention."

Maman de l'Eau? Oh, it meant *Mami Wata*.

"Boy!"

When a forty-foot-plus giant snake shouts at you, you sit up straight and salute. “Yesss! I mean, yes, what’s the message?”

The snake flicked its tongue at me in annoyance. “The messsage is thisss: The watersss around Old Angola don’t feel right anymore. There’s a foulnesss in the currentsss, and the ssspiritsss in the area are growing ressstlesss. They’re getting angry.”

I shook my head, confused. “Angola? As in Africa? Is this about iron monsters again? And what do you mean the spirits are getting angry?”

“Lisssten, ssstoryteller! Now isss the time for hearing and not ssspeaking. Maman de l’Eau will underssstand, but only if you tell her exactly what I sssay. Tell her the ssspiritsss are angry! Sssomething ssstirsss in Angola. Sssomething long ago buried. The water reeksss of fear and the fish avoid the deep, ssstill partsss of the river. Even the birdsss no longer fly overhead. Mark my wordsss, ssstoryteller, listen to the warning of Yemonja! All the godsss will fall if the evil in Angola risesss!”

The final hiss didn’t fade but grew in volume until it filled the cabin and forced me to cover my ears. The giant snake lunged, and I just managed to hurl myself out of the way, banging my head on something sharp behind me. An explosion of lights bloomed in front of my eyes. A blur of scales zoomed overhead as the full length of the snake curled around the room, the tail lashing into couches and armchairs, before it shot out the window into the night. One moment the reptile seemed to fill the entire space, and the next the room was empty and black as my eyes fluttered shut.

Only the final part of its warning lingered, though I couldn’t tell if it was an echo or just in my head.

*All the godsss will fall if the evil in Angola risesss.*

# 6
# MORTAR OVER BONES

**I KNEW I WAS DREAMING WHEN EDDIE SHOWED UP**.

My dead best friend entered the cabin and sat in one of the chairs. He didn't look at me. Didn't speak. Still wore the same Malcolm X T-shirt and the same thick-framed glasses. I stood up and walked over, a giant lump in my throat. The last time I'd seen him, Eddie and I were in the bowels of the Maafa, the ancient sentient slave ship that had once terrorized Alke, and he'd said I could never speak to him again. And as I waved at him and tried to get his attention now, I guessed that was true, because he didn't once look in my direction.

At some point, while I was focused on Eddie, more people appeared in the room. They didn't walk through the door or climb through the window like the giant snake. They just… materialized. One minute it was just me; the next, every seat in the suite was occupied. By folks I knew.

An elder ancestor spirit from Isihlangu was in the front, a talking skull in his lap. Two small bears sat next to a wrinkled woman, and when she turned to hush one of them, I inhaled sharply. It was my great-aunt Denise, Nana's sister, who had died recently. In fact, everyone at the Strong reunion had just celebrated her life earlier in the week. I remembered her wide smile from the picture, and now she was turning it on… were those Bear's cubs?

A sharp caw sent me whirling around in shock. Old Familiar, the shadow crow of Alke, ruffled his wings in the back of the cabin, where the giant bird took up the entire wall. Unlike everyone else, who was ignoring me, Old Familiar cocked his head and stared at me before cawing again and stabbing his beak toward the person speaking in the front of the room. When I turned to look, I recognized the man.

High John the Conqueror.

He was in the middle of a lecture. Of course. Only I would dream about a lesson during my last few days of summer vacation.

"All right, everyone," he said. "Let's pick up where we left off. The buried narratives. Finding the stories within the story, the ones that exist in the white space. The blanks on the pages… what do they frame?"

Suddenly he turned to me, and though I could still hear him addressing the ghosts in the room, High John's voice crashed like a tidal wave into my skull.

"What do you see, boy?" he asked.

I shook my head. I didn't have an answer.

"What do you see?" he asked again. This time he turned to the window, staring out at the cityscape. In my dream it was still nighttime, but now I could see a bright light casting a glare into the suite.

"What do you see?" High John asked a third time, and then he turned back to his spectral students.

I glanced around. None of the spirits paid me any attention. I turned back to Eddie, who had a pen and notebook in hand and was scrawling away furiously. I grinned and peeked at his paper. Sure enough, he was doing what he'd done back when he was alive, when we'd shared six out of seven classes.

He was doodling.

Somehow, that bit of memory gave me confidence. I went over to the window. Outside, the French Quarter shone. Like, I couldn't make out individual buildings, or people, or anything. It was a single smear of yellow-orange light. Almost… almost golden.

I inhaled. The light was a beacon.

When I turned around, High John stared at me again as the rest of the class faded away. He smiled. "What do you see?"

Before I could answer, he walked off, disappearing through the wall.

Eddie was the only spirit remaining in the room. He slid his notebook into his backpack and tucked his pen into his shirt pocket, like he'd always done at school, and then stood and walked past me.

"Eddie?" I knew he wouldn't answer, but I couldn't help it.

He never acknowledged me, though.

*CAW!*

Old Familiar stretched his wings at the back of the room, turned his beak, and fixed one large golden eye on me. He cocked his head, as if asking a question and waiting on an answer.

I nodded. "I know what I have to do."

Old Familiar ruffled his feathers and hopped. With two flaps he was airborne, each wing touching a wall in the suite, and the giant shadow crow flew straight at me. I didn't move. I just shut my eyes.

When my eyes fluttered open, thunder boomed. I sat up and winced. The back of my head ached where it had slammed into the floor when I dodged the giant snake. But High John's words lingered, and I shoved myself upright. I ran over to the window and leaned out into the night. From here New Orleans appeared like it should on a summer evening. Vibrant. The French Quarter practically hummed with energy as the sounds of music and cheer reverberated across the water.

*What do you see?*

My adinkra bracelet hung on my right arm. I reached for it now, avoiding the akofena and instead grabbing the sky god's charm, Gye Nyame. With this gift I could see the stories that made up the world and the people in it. I began to close my eyes, but something weird happened.

The power activated on its own, before I summoned it. Like the akofena's fire back on the barge.

"What is going on?" I whispered. But when I raised my eyes, that mystery faded, because New Orleans lay written before me.

I saw stories—written in French and Spanish and Chitimacha and English—about the birth of jazz and the death of neighborhoods. I saw tales of the Fon and the Ewe and the Igbo, and legends of Vodun and Vodou and the spirits within. Languages I didn't recognize formed words that I did, all spiraling up Canal Street and Peters Street and Chartres Street, avenues paved with the history of the city.

But there were other stories, too, hidden behind that history. I could see them like faint pencil marks not quite erased. As I squinted, the words shivered and grew brighter, until eventually they outshone everything that had been scrawled on top of them.

I read about the slave ports that had dotted the Mississippi River.

I read about rice, and sugar, and the crops raised on plantations in the city.

I read about people treated as cargo.

I read about the glamorous buildings that had been built around the sale of men, women, girls, and boys like me. Some older, some younger. My eyes followed the flowing script of a Fon mother's lullaby as she was separated from her children in one of those buildings. I read the history and saw that the structure had been torn down decades before I was born, and now a glitzy hotel stood in its place. The hotel where some of the Strong family members were currently staying.

Mortar over bones.

Finally, I read about the barges that had hauled the shackled enslaved north, up the river, to a giant plantation. A free man's protests were scrawled in the grass of Artillery Park, where he'd been kidnapped and sold back into slavery. A family's prayers were carved into the pillars lining the docks along the Mississippi, where they'd been separated, never to see each other again. These were the hidden narratives High John had been talking about. This is what he had meant.

I blinked and the sky god's power faded away. My view returned to normal, and New Orleans reappeared as a modern city teeming with nightlife. I frowned. There was more to the construction of my world than I'd realized.

My eyes slid across the waterfront as I sighed. Cryptic instructions from gods and their messengers were going to be the death of me. I watched a tugboat push a barge up the river in the darkness, and my eyes narrowed. It was the same barge we'd fought the coffle on. The memory of the shadow gloves setting everything on fire stabbed through me again, and I took a deep breath.

*What do you see?*

*All the godsss will fail if the evil in Angola risesss.*

I froze. Cotton had come here for something. What if it had something to do with the snake's warning? And what if—

My vision blurred, then sharpened. I stumbled and managed to grab the windowsill before I fell. What was happening? The spirit bead? But I hadn't activated it.

As soon as I looked back out the window, the question answered itself.

The barge was crammed end to end with spirits. Boys and girls. Mothers and fathers. People of all ages and—by the look of the clothes they wore— from all different eras huddled together, and the reason stalked into view seconds later.

Coffles, several of them, towered over the spirits. Some stood in the middle of the barge like slave drivers while others skittered around the edges like overseers. Movement caught my eye and my chest tightened as I saw more spirits waiting on the riverbanks in the shadows, lines of them trapped between the coffles and the water.

*They hauled the enslaved up north, to a giant plantation.*

I turned to look for Gum Baby, who'd never reappeared. That was starting to worry me. I reached for the SBP in my pocket, then remembered it had been confiscated. I made a sour face. Being grounded really interfered with saving the world. But maybe it was for the best. What would they say? Gum Baby, Anansi, John Henry, or Granddad, or even Nana… What would their advice be if I tried to alert them? *Leave it to the adults! Don't rush in! Stay put and keep your head down!*

And you know what? For ten seconds I did exactly that.

Until *another* coffle crawled out of the river and began to scuttle through the shadows into the city. This one headed south. The others had gone north. They were cordoning off the French Quarter! Everyone inside it, including my relatives and the Alkean gods, would be trapped. Whatever Cotton was planning, I had to stop it—now.

# 7

# WHEN THE HAINTS... COME MARCHING IN

**A SHROUD LAY OVER THE FRENCH QUARTER. NO ONE COULD SEE IT** but me. And as I sprinted up Canal Street and slipped through the crowds on Bourbon Street, I wanted to keep it that way. Music played and tourists danced. The smell of treats both sweet and savory wafted up one street and down another. Bright neon lights indicated bars I wasn't allowed to enter while inside grown-ups laughed and shouted and ignored the state of the world for a few minutes. In other words, everything seemed normal.

But I knew better.

Under the street music, I could hear a drumbeat. Low and steady. The kind that played when Alkean magic was nearby. The kind that warned me to keep my eyes open. I could see a shimmer in the air throughout the Quarter, a sheen that drifted over certain spots. Something was about to happen, and I only had a few minutes to find my family and my friends from Alke before everything exploded.

"Hey there, big man, where you going in such a hurry?" That voice.

My feet stopped by themselves, and my heart skipped a beat. That voice haunted my dreams. Or my nightmares. I slowly turned around on the

sidewalk, hoping against hope that it was my imagination. I was just hearing things…right?

A man sat at a small round table on an outdoor patio. He wore a plain white linen suit, white penny loafers, and his stringy white hair was neatly combed and swept down to hide the entire right side of his pale face. Thin black sunglasses perched on the end of his nose, and one sharp eye peered over them at me.

And yet everything about him was wrong. Evil oozed off him like heat haze above asphalt on a summer day. I took a step forward, my fists clenched and the need to summon the shadow gloves singing in my blood.

"Cotton," I squeezed out through gritted teeth.

The last time I'd seen the haint this close was in the bowels of the Maafa. Gum Baby had been by my side, and together we'd driven the orchestrator of the iron-monster terror into the bottom of the Burning Sea. And yet here he was, sipping an espresso as calm as you please.

"Ah, ah, ah," the disguised haint said as I closed in. He smiled, wide and humorless. "Better watch those hands. Wouldn't want to set this lovely historic area on fire, would we? No, I thought not. Not after you torched the barge and nearly burned your cousin." Cotton took a sip of thick black liquid—was that even coffee?—and set down the cup. "How is little Terrence, by the way? Still terrified of you?"

My fingers trembled. I wanted to leap across the table. That's what Cotton did to you. He got under your skin. Picked at weaknesses that hadn't scarred over yet and poked your most vulnerable places. Cotton was a bully, and everyone knows how aggravating bullies are. And his followers threatened the entire district we stood in. So I kept my cool. I had to figure out what he wanted, then find my family and escape.

"What do you want?" I finally managed to ask.

"Oh, you know." He sat back and let his fingers walk along the railing separating the two of us. His nails were long and sharp, and discolored on the undersides. They moved like the coffles, and I shuddered. "I want it all, baby boy. I want the stars and the moon. Shoot your shot, they say, and I'm shooting." He flashed his smile again. His teeth were pointed and stained, too.

"You sound like a cheesy fitness instructor," I said.

Cotton's smile faded. "Always with the jokes, boy. Well, tell me if you think this is funny."

He reached inside his jacket. I flinched, and he smirked at my fear. He pulled out a closed fist and then, finger by finger, revealed what he held and set it on the table. I stared at the object, my jaw dropping. It was a smooth, perfectly circular black stone with gold flecks. One of Junior's.

This was the second time someone had produced one of his throwing stones. Where *was* Junior? Did Anansi know his son might be in the vicinity? I almost let a grin cross my face as I imagined how the skinny son of Alke would react when I saved him.

But the urge to smile disappeared. This could be a trick….

"Now I heard you know somebody who can sling these things like nobody's business," Cotton said. "Is that right?"

I didn't answer. My eyes remained fixated on the stone. Was Junior okay? Was Ayanna with him? Where were they?

"Well, it just so happens I met me a boy, right around your age as I think about it, and he could clip the wings off a fly with one of these things. I know because he showed me."

"Junior would never talk to someone like you!" I shouted. Several nearby pedestrians glanced at me, then moved away. I tried to swallow the rage that threatened to consume me again, and I forced my hands flat against my thighs.

"I know…" Cotton repeated, leaning in closer and lowering his voice, "because I *made* him show me."

The words lingered in the air between us for several seconds before the haint relaxed and spread both arms wide in a placating gesture. "Now, please, please, don't get all worked up. I haven't hurt the boy—yet. But that's only because I'm a kindhearted gentleman, and I need you to do me a favor."

"What?"

"I need your expertise, your ability to find magic in the world and tell its story. Do what you do best—tell me a tale. Tell me about them gods that traveled over here with you. Tell me the ins and outs of your world, who's in power, who's hungry for change. Tell me how to shoot to the top, and I'll be sure to take you with me. I got me a way, but it's too… too violent. Ain't no need for all that. You and me can knock this out easy." Cotton looked me square in the eyes, and all traces of humor evaporated as the soulless haint's glare burrowed deep into me. "You promise to do that for me, and I'll help you find your friends."

The world stilled around me. “You want me to snitch.”

“Aw, don’t call it that.” Cotton leaned back in his chair and picked at his teeth. “You make it sound so dirty. People been trading information for advantage for centuries. Money is cool, but information is power. A tip here, a hint there… You and me can make moves all the way to the bank. The only thing I want you to do is tell me something good. Can I count on you, big man?”

He nudged the throwing stone toward me, one sharp finger tapping it slowly. And to be truthful, I considered it. For a brief second, I hesitated. I wanted to find my friends. They were in a strange new world because of me. I had a responsibility to show them how to move through a society where people could see them but couldn’t perceive the magic that was in them, where people would dress them in their expectations and nothing more. The unfamiliar could get lost here, and once you dropped out of view in this world, it was *out of sight, out of mind*. The only people who could save you were the ones who knew you were there.

I knew my friends were near here. Ayanna. Junior. Thandiwe. I just had to find them.

But I saw how Cotton was handling that stone. Though he was offering it to me, his clawlike finger remained in control of it. And any offer Cotton made would be the same—it would allow him to get his hooks into me. The requests would be small at first—information here, a timeline there. But over time his demands would grow. I could see it in the haint’s face. Greed lurked behind his sunglasses.

“No,” I said.

The finger stopped tapping the stone. “Excuse me?”

Time slowed. Pedestrians streamed around me, laughing, nodding their heads to one of the many rhythms intersecting in the Quarter. Bourbon Street funneled them deeper inside, where they would try to find whatever it was they were looking for that evening. Food. Drinks. A good time. But I was looking for something, too, and I’d finally figured out that Cotton would never give it to me, not that easily. Which meant all he was doing right now was stalling.

I backed up. The haint stood. “What do you mean, no?” he snarled. “I’m giving you a lifeline, boy. Grab it before you drown. Grab it before I turn this world upside down and all of it dogpiles on your chest. Grab it now!”

I spun around, squeezing the spirit bead on my bracelet. The world went dim as I searched up and down the block for ghosts, spirits, and everything in between. Nothing. They were all gone. Taken to the barges.

I kicked myself mentally. I'd been so preoccupied with Cotton, just as he'd intended, that I'd lost sight of my primary goals—finding my family and alerting the gods.

When I turned back to Cotton, I stumbled backward in shock. The spirit bead revealed his true appearance, and the horrible image was seared into my brain. I let go of the bead, but the picture remained. Why were my powers so unpredictable all of a sudden? I didn't want to look at him, but I was afraid that if I looked away, he'd attack.

Vines crept in and out of his sleeves and the cuffs of his pants, and his eyes, no longer behind sunglasses, smoked at the corners. His hair was lank and matted, snarling on thorns that poked out of his face and neck. He grinned, and I turned away in revulsion at just how long his teeth really were. When I looked back, he was folding his napkin and dabbing at the corner of his mouth, but his gaze never left me. I watched him warily.

So when he lunged forward, I slipped to the side, leaving him grasping at air.

Cotton laughed. "I had to try once, boy. Can't blame a haint for that."

My fists clenched, and black flames began to ripple in the air. But Cotton didn't move. Instead, he pulled out a rusty pocket watch, checked the time, and sighed. "Time's up, boy," he said simply. "I gave you a chance. Now, we can have it out right here, or…"

I gritted my teeth as the flames grew. People were starting to look at me strangely, though others laughed and pointed, as if I was just a part of the Bourbon Street spectacle. "Or what?"

Screams cut into the night. At the far end of the street, just past some jugglers, a coffle sprang into the crowd.

"Or you can go and save a few worthless lives. Your choice."

Cotton turned and began to walk down the street in the opposite direction, slipping between gawking pedestrians as he whistled a tune. I started after him, but the crowd pressed toward me, eager to see what was happening. I forced my fists to unclench, trying to make the flames disappear. I couldn't let them touch anyone! It felt like it took forever, but the fire finally petered out and I dashed forward, hopping to keep an eye on Cotton. In order to reach him, I'd have to squeeze past a group of women

linked arm in arm…. I might've made it if a familiar shriek hadn't split the air.

I could just see Cotton's hat lift as he saluted me. With a growl of frustration, I turned around and raced toward the screams.

# 8

# THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT . . . FOR NOW

**IN BOXING, WE CALL MULTIPLE PUNCHES THROWN IN QUICK** succession a *combination*, or *combo* for short. Boxers use them to string together attacks, target weaknesses, and overwhelm opponents. Combos are cool to watch, and when you're in the ring and you pull one off successfully, it's pretty sweet. The Walter Strong special, my granddad's favorite combo, is the one-two punch—a quick jab followed by a straight. He likes to say the other boxers never knew what hit them.

We all could have learned a thing or two from the coffles.

The monsters attacked with lightning speed, from different angles, and never in the same pattern twice. Three of them towered above the fleeing crowd. They slashed and sliced, sending the tourists scattering throughout the French Quarter. The night filled with screams as I fought my way through the crowds. No one knew which direction to run—people dashed out of bars before clumping together in intersections of tight alleys and narrow streets. I managed to shimmy through a cluster of panicked college students before finally bursting into a clear space… only to realize a coffle stood there.

Because of course. The monster was between me and the riverfront. A few of the college students gawked at it and held up their phones, unsure

whether it was an attraction or a threat, and I shook my head. Some people have no sense. But their impending horror-movie failure was the least of my concerns.

The twisted wooden creature shrieked, and the other two appeared at its side.

“Oh, great!” I shouted, throwing up my hands. As if the night couldn’t get any worse.

The trio cut and slashed their way forward, and finally—finally!—the college students scattered. Two of the coffles dashed after them, on the left and right. They didn’t allow anyone past, cutting off escape routes with vicious stabs of their front limbs, while the third coffle scuttled through the crowd with its pincer heads threatening to clamp around the necks of stragglers too slow to get out of its way. The coffles were working as a team. Looking for someone. And it appeared that they found him or her, because suddenly all three converged on something I couldn’t see.

I had to take action.

“Hey!” I shouted at the coffles, sidestepping a man and woman who were racing past me. “HEY! Over here.”

I waved both arms and then bent down to pick up a half-full cup someone had left on the curb. I hurled it at the nearest creature.

“That was my drink!” someone protested.

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry!”

The cup smacked the lead coffle upside the head, and the creature pivoted to look at me.

“That’s right!” I shouted. “This way! I took down your brother or cousin or nephew-in-law earlier. You wanna test me, too? Come on! I’m right here.”

I had to get the three of them to follow me. Maybe I could lead them away from the crowd and back to Artillery Park. Or to the plaza in front of the St. Louis Cathedral. I’d sprint as fast as I could back to Congo Square if I had to. Anyplace other than the packed streets of the Quarter.

There was only one problem—the monsters weren’t paying me any attention.

The three coffles towered over a tiny duplex that was wedged between a souvenir shop and a walk-up gumbo stand. I snuck closer to get a better view, hiding behind a pickup truck parked across the street. The monsters were trying to use their sharp, splintered limbs to tear down a wooden

barricade blocking the doorway to the lower apartment. Several kids leaned out the second-floor window, hurling rocks, bricks, and insults at the intruders.

"Your arms too short to box with the gods!" "Better get your weight up!" "I've lit matches bigger than you!"

I don't know if the coffles understood how badly they were being roasted, but they certainly didn't appreciate the kids raining down projectiles. The monsters screeched in triumph when one of the barricade's boards finally ripped free, and some of the insults stopped as a few of the kids looked concerned. I frowned. They couldn't have been much older than me—in fact, several looked to be younger, around Terrence's age.

*SNAP!*

A second board cracked, and the coffles began to slash through the gap. Screams came from inside. I glanced to my left—the creatures still weren't paying any attention to me, and I could probably sneak away now and go find my family and friends. But then I turned back to the cornered kids and swallowed hard. I couldn't just leave them….

I started to clench my fists, then hesitated. Could I risk using the shadow gloves? No, I… I couldn't. My previous rage still scared me, and Cotton's smirking laugh lingered in the back of my mind. I looked around, then grabbed a section of pipe lying in the gutter next to me. Sometimes you have to do things the old-fashioned way.

*CRUNCH!*

The first the coffles knew I was attacking them was when the leftmost monster went down in a heap. The pipe wasn't as devastating as the shadow gloves, but it worked just fine on the creatures' spindly legs.

I swung again and again, trying to take out the coffle before it could rise. The monster wriggled and writhed on the ground, and I had to hop and dodge its flailing limbs or my legs would've been ripped to shreds.

"Hey, look!" The shout came from above my head. I couldn't check to see who it was, because a second coffle now stalked me, scuttling sideways around its still-writhing partner while a continuous, low keen came from its serrated mouth. It edged to my right, then moved even closer.

"Watch out!"

This time I *did* look, and thank goodness for that.

“Sweet peaches!” I said, diving beneath a swing from the third coffle, who’d crept up on my left and tried to ambush me. Now I had two monsters hemming me in, and try as I might, I couldn’t escape. They didn’t fall for my feints, and their multiple long legs could pin me to the ground if I got too close. I scrambled to my feet and licked my lips, trying to find a way out. I couldn’t lose like this, not to a pair of wooden crab monsters.

The coffle on my left lunged. I parried the attack with the pipe, then ducked a swipe from the monster on my right. A burning sensation ripped across my forearm, causing me to yelp and drop my weapon. I tried to retrieve it with my other arm, but the third coffle had somehow managed to rise up, and it now staggered forward, just within reach. The monsters shrieked, and I took a deep, shuddering breath.

My wrists burst into silver flame.

I couldn’t avoid it anymore. The tension in my shoulders and the fear in my chest and the overwhelming feeling that this was the end of Tristan Strong sent churning waves of anger rippling through me, and I began to ball my hands into fists.

“Hey, in here!”

A voice shouted at me from behind the broken slat barrier. Hands gripped my shirt and pulled me into the opening in the doorway just as one of the coffles slashed at the spot where I’d been standing. I stumbled into darkness. I turned, ready to swing at whoever—or whatever—had clutched at me, only to see a kid with her hands in the air. A young Black girl in a wheelchair, her hair in pigtails and her eyes wide.

“Sorry!” she said, backing up quickly. “But we need to get out of here. That barricade won’t hold for long and— Hey, are you on fire?”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the second-to-last board splintered beneath the stabbing attack of a coffle. I fell on my butt and scrambled backward. All I could see of the monsters were their legs as they patrolled back and forth in front of the entrance, too large to enter but still sending occasional slicing probes through the doorway.

The streetlamps cast shadows across the sidewalk outside. Screams echoed in the distance, but from what I could tell, this particular area was now free of tourists. At least my distraction maneuver had accomplished that much.

I shot up to my feet. The silver flames on my wrists had disappeared, thank goodness. But when I peered outside, something else stopped me in

my tracks. Beyond the coffles, across the street, by the very pickup truck I'd hidden behind, stood a tall figure. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but it was definitely an adult, and they were clothed in all gray from head to toe. They wore what looked like a slasher-movie hockey mask over their face—also gray, with a solid red line drawn diagonally from the right eye to the left side of their chin. Their eyeholes were pools of black.

The girl in the wheelchair tugged on my arm. "Come on, this way!"

"Okay," I said, nodding. I moved to follow her. After a second I looked back out the door.

The masked figure in gray remained motionless, but I could feel their eyes following me into the dark.

The kid ("Jessica, but my friends call me Jess.") led me through a dark hallway, up a ramp, and through a second-floor door into an abandoned kitchen. She kept up a steady conversation as we moved through the shadows and stopped at the far wall.

"It's a good thing I found you. You looked like you were ready to give up. I've seen it before. Those things never quit. I had one chase me for thirty minutes before Memphis finally helped me."

"Memphis…" I repeated dully, my mind on figuring out how I was going to get back to the *River Queen* and warn my family and the gods.

"Yeah, Memphis. You'll see. They can help

you." "They?"

Jess nodded. "Memphis is nonbinary."

"Got it."

After some preparations, Jess slid aside a stained curtain hanging from a doorway to reveal a rooftop terrace. The building next door, separated by an alley, had a similar outdoor patio. The space between the two roofs was narrow enough that it could be spanned by a couple pieces of lumber. Jess rolled across them without any hesitation, spinning around after reaching the adjacent house and beckoning me to follow. I gulped and tried not to think about falling down to the alley that was probably covered in *delightful* offerings the tourists had so *thoughtfully* left behind.

I managed to tightrope-walk across without losing either my balance or my lunch, and Jess led me over a few more makeshift bridges before bringing me to an outdoor elevator that led to the top of a nondescript brick building. It was a store, currently closed, and we traveled up to the top to

discover several homemade tents and multiple worn sleeping bags scattered across the roof. A lean-to shelter made of old plywood and a plastic tarp had been propped up against an HVAC ventilation fan. A few kids lay inside, but Jess waved me away from them and hurried over to the edge of the roof, where a pair of binoculars rested on a brick ledge that came up to my knees.

The whole time she'd been leading me, Jess had kept up a steady stream of one-sided conversation. I mean, she talked about everything. The coffles. The Quarter. The moon. It reminded me of my cousin Terrence and how once he latched on to a subject he wouldn't let it go until he'd exhausted all possible topics surrounding it. I chuckled, and then the humor died away. I hoped he was okay. I hoped *everyone* had made it out of danger safely. It was torture not having my phone with me. I'd gladly deal with a sulking Anansi if it meant I could have a few reassuring words from someone that everything was going to be fine.

"So, this is our lookout," Jess was saying. "It's how we spotted you." I shook my thoughts away. "Lookout?"

"Yep. We try to keep an eye out for other kids and get to them before the monsters do."

"You mean the coffles?" I asked.

Jess picked up the binoculars and glanced at me with her eyebrows raised. "Is that what they're called? I'll have to tell Memphis. We've been trying to figure out what they are for the last few weeks."

Her words hit me like a bucket of ice water. "Weeks? This has been going on for *weeks*? Why haven't I heard about it? Why hasn't anyone been talking about it?"

Jess shrugged. "You don't sound like you're from around here. Nobody ever talks about kids gone missing. Or if they do, it's a few words, a picture, and then on to the next headline."

I thought about the tourists at the restaurants, talking and eating as the news played in the background. And Seraphine had mentioned missing kids, too. Where was the uproar? The search parties? Could this somehow be connected to the coffles loading spirits onto the barges? And speaking of…

"So," I said, sort of in a daze, "what about the coffles? I saw some people recording them on their phones. Why isn't the internet blowing up about them?"

Jess sighed in frustration. “I don’t know. Memphis was asking the same thing. In fact, the whole reason they went out today was to get pictures of the—you called them coffles?—so we can try to get them trending. Get more people to pay attention. But Memphis has been gone for over an hour now…. I was going to go look for them when the coffles saw me.”

A sharp whistle rang from the streets below, cutting off whatever response I might’ve had. Jess brightened and grabbed the binoculars. “That’s Memphis!” Another set of whistles rang out, and her face fell. “They’re in trouble. Come on!”

We dashed to the opposite edge of the roof, where Jess leaned dangerously over the ledge, straining to look for something in the glare of the Quarter’s bright lights. After a few seconds she stabbed downward with her finger. “There!”

A flashlight blinked, the beam shooting up into the night before it turned off. Jess mumbled to herself, keeping her finger raised as she tried to work something out, then she suddenly spun her wheelchair around and zoomed over to the elevator.

“Come on!” she shouted back at me. “We gotta help!”

I followed her. “Help what? And how? I need to get back to the river.”

“I’ve never been that far,” Jess said, rolling across one patio bridge and over to the next. “But Memphis can take you! If there’s anyplace you need to go without anyone noticing, Memphis’ll get you there. But we gotta help them first, or we ain’t going anywhere. Ever.”

I stifled a comment, then scrambled after her. All right, I’d save one more person. Then I’d get back to the boat before anyone noticed I’d been gone. Find Gum Baby. Let Mami Wata know about Cotton and the snake’s warning. Maybe by now Nyame or John Henry or one of the other Alkeans would have news about Ayanna and Junior and Thandiwe. The thought of being reunited with my friends burned bright in my head, and I latched on to it. Yeah, maybe there would be news.

Jess led me across patio after patio before we rushed up a ramp to another rooftop. The space was empty save for four piles of bricks, rocks, and a couple broken tree branches at each corner. She rolled to the northeast corner and let out a trio of piercing whistles. This time I caught the flashlight beam as it speared the night before turning off. Memphis was close, real close. Jess nodded to the pile of debris as she locked the brakes

on her wheels. “Get ready. When I say so, help me push all this into the alley.”

I peeked over the edge. “Are you sure?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she began to count down. “Three. Two. One. Push, push!”

She shoved against the massive pile, and, after a second of indecision, I joined her. Slowly, noisily, the bricks and rocks began to shift, before they tumbled over the edge in a deluge of dust and grit. An ear-piercing shriek cut the night, and my heart leaped into my throat. What had I done? Was someone injured? I remembered Granddad once telling me about a hotel that had collapsed in the Quarter and the devastation it had caused. I leaned over the ledge, horrified at what I might find, only to see several twitching wooden legs sticking out from the rubble.

A coffle. We’d taken out a coffle. The relief sweeping through my body made my knees tremble.

“There!”

Jess pointed down the alley where a kid with a cloak (a *cloak*?) was just turning a corner. We rushed to the other side of the roof, and Jess glided down a homemade ramp that led into the open second-floor window of an empty apartment. We went out the back door, across another patio ramp-bridge, and then into a house similar to the one where we’d started. Jess stopped me at the back door, peeking outside as she opened it just enough to allow in a sliver of light.

Suddenly she whipped it open all the way, and the kid dove inside. Jess shoved the door shut, then locked it and motioned for me to grab one end of a heavy wooden table. We managed to slide it in front of the door just in time.

Something jiggled the doorknob.

We held our breath as a shadow stepped into the light seeping through the crack under the door. The knob jiggled again, then once more. My heart thudded in my chest, and I was sure whoever it was would kick down the door and drag us all out. In that instant, hiding in the dark with two other kids I’d never met and shared nothing in common with other than the very real fear of being taken away, I knew that if I moved—if I even breathed— it was over.

After what seemed like an eternity, a voice spoke outside the door. “Yes, ma’am. No sign of them. No, ma’am. Yes, ma’am. On my way.”

The shadow disappeared, and the sound of footsteps faded.

We all exhaled. Jess and I exchanged a shaky smile, and then she hurried to help her friend.

“Memphis, are you— What are you doing?” she asked.

I turned to find a large kid, eyes narrowed, sticking a phone screen in my face. It was showing a news feed, and scrawled across the top in big bold letters was a headline that felt like a punch to the gut.

*RIOTERS IN THE FRENCH QUARTER*, it read. Underneath was a picture of me hurling a cup full of liquid, a look of raw anger on my face.

The hand dropped and the phone disappeared inside the cloak.

“Tristan Strong,” Memphis said. “Bet it seems like everyone’s been looking for you.”

Memphis Jones stood a full head taller than anyone else in the room, and the bright royal-blue cloak they wore made them seem twice as wide. With golden-brown skin, hooded eyes that revealed nothing as they sized you up, and a curly ponytail with clean-shaven sides, their presence engulfed us all. Everyone seemed to take their cues from them, and the energy visibly picked up as Memphis walked around, checked on the younger children, and nodded while the others relayed tidbits of info.

There were a dozen of us or so back in what Jess called “the Hideout”—the rooftop refuge with the lean-to and the kids napping inside. Several beanbag chairs had been dragged into the middle of the roof, and someone produced mismatched novelty cups from the Quarter and passed around a cool jug of lemonade. If not for the events of the evening, it could have been a fun and relaxing get-together. Instead, it was a war party.

“I don’t understand,” I said for the fifth time. I held Memphis’s phone in both hands, my elbows on my knees as I leaned forward and stared at my picture. “Where are the coffles? Did no one get a picture of them?”

Memphis winced and dropped into a chair across from me. We both waved good-bye to Jess as she began to lead a few of the younger kids down into the house, and then Memphis cradled their shoulder, moving it in slow circles while shaking their head. “You’re asking the wrong question.” Their voice was low, almost raspy, as if they were suffering from a cold. “The real question is, who took the photo?”

I shrugged. “Probably one of the college students drinking nearby.” “You sure? Look at the picture.”

I studied the phone, and once again I wished I had the SBP with me. Anansi's advice would have been really useful at that moment. But I didn't, so I tried to think like he would. I zoomed in, rotated it, and pursed my lips. Then…

"Wait." I looked up. "They got a clear shot of my face. Which means whoever took the photo was in front of me… near the coffles."

Memphis nodded. "That person wasn't worried about the monsters…. They were worried about *you*. So," they said, reclining in the beanbag, "seems like you got a few enemies, Tristan Strong. Some look like you and me, and some look like they hopped straight out of a horror movie."

I narrowed my eyes. "For someone who just outran giant sentient prisoner restraints, you don't seem that fazed. Why?"

Memphis stared at me, their face screwed up in thought, hands fiddling with the ends of their cloak. "'The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.'"

"What?"

"It's a quote I read once. Basically, people will try their hardest to ignore something that doesn't fit in with their reality." Memphis stood and beckoned me to follow. "Everybody in this place has seen some wild stuff. Scary stuff. Stuff that makes you angry, stuff that makes you cry. That monster—a coffle, you called it? It ain't nothin' but a Tuesday afternoon around here. But for those whose life fits neatly inside the rules, if they see it, they'll pretend they didn't."

"So… like sweeping it under a rug?" That was one of Nana's favorite expressions. It's when you hide something and pretend nothing happened. I tried it once. Literally. Used a broom to gather up a giant pile of dirt and leaves and swept it under one of her hallway rugs. I don't know what I did wrong, because as soon as Nana came into the hallway she saw the rug sticking up like a camel's hump. Adults need better sayings.

Memphis snorted. "Something like that."

We descended into the house, climbing over barricades of furniture and pushing aside an overturned desk to reveal a hidden door. Memphis put a hand on the doorknob, then paused.

"Look, I want you to know one thing. Those kids up there? They're family. I treat them like they're my blood. And I'm not gonna let anything put them in danger. I do what I do because no one else can, and it needs to be done. Kids like that, someone sees them on the street trying to hustle up

food and they're liable to call the police on them, and that's the last thing they need. They need help, not a record. Once they get into the system, there's no getting out. That's why I do what I do."

"I understand," I said, but Memphis shook their head.

"Nah, I don't think you do. You know the risks. So do I. But those kids upstairs ain't like you or me. I can handle myself, but I was two seconds from being skewered and dragged off to who knows where. What's going to happen when I'm not here and one of them goes outside and the monsters attack? Or when them new folks, the ones with the masks, start yanking us off the streets? We need help, man. If you got a way to stop these things, you've got to show me how."

"The masks?" I echoed.

They didn't answer. Instead, their gaze fell to my adinkra bracelet.

My heart dropped. They were looking at my magic charms. I slowly shook my head. "I'm sorry, but…"

Memphis sucked their teeth and turned away.

"They're not something I can share like that," I said. "Believe me, if I could pass on the powers, I would."

"Yeah, I get it." Memphis studied the door for a second, then looked back at me. "We're on our own. I just heard you were different."

I folded my arms across my chest and stared at the shadows playing across the ceiling. "Sorry to disappoint you. Somebody told you wrong."

Memphis nodded and opened the door, flicking the light switch and then standing aside. "I guess she did."

I looked at them curiously, then peered inside the room, only to let out a strangled gasp as I took in the girl sitting in a chair. She was surveying several younger children who were sleeping on a pile of blankets on the floor. Her left leg had a bandage on it, her right arm cradled a gold-painted baseball bat, and there were several shards of what appeared to be the remains of a coffle in the corner of the room. The girl lifted her head and made a shushing gesture.

"You can have five minutes," Memphis said, folding their arms and leaning against the doorframe. "And then she's gotta rest. You should get some sleep, too. She said y'all needed to leave for the river ASAP, but you're gonna have to wait till dawn. Too dangerous to go before then."

I nodded, but words didn't come as I dropped to the ground next to the injured girl, her golden bangles twinkling in the dim light.

“About time you showed up,” Ayanna whispered.

# 9
# THE FERRYMAN'S WARNING

**NOTHING MOVED IN THE FRENCH QUARTER. SHUTTERED WINDOWS** and locked doors were the only witnesses to our passage as Memphis, Ayanna, and I descended from the rooftop refuge at dawn. We carefully removed the debris that blocked the entrance, then replaced it once we were outside, disguising the Hideout as an abandoned duplex. It felt wrong. I wanted to advertise the fact that there were children trying to survive inside. Where was the help? The GoFundMes and the shared PayPal accounts to give them a leg up? Could we Kickstart a system that would come to their rescue? As I'd been doing a lot lately, I bit back my frustration and pushed it deep down. I would carry their stories if no one else would. Besides, I had enough to worry about.

"You're sure my grandparents told us to go back?" I asked. My voice carried in the silent morning, and I winced at how loud it seemed.

Ayanna nodded, grimacing a little bit. "Yes."

"But they actually said that? Nana didn't want me to come find her?"

She sighed. "You keep asking me, and it's not going to change. Your grandmother specifically told me to tell you to take your hard-headed behind back to Mami Wata. I don't know how she knew you'd be here, but

then again I don't know how your grandmother does a lot of things. Runs in the family I guess."

I muttered something rude under my breath and Ayanna elbowed me, and it felt good to sort of be back to normal. Well, except for the fact she was hurt, I hadn't warned or rescued anyone like I'd intended, and there were more vulnerable people in the world than I realized. Another successful mission. Not.

We stepped into the day and got smacked by the humidity, even at that early hour. Memphis swept ahead of us, their cloak trailing behind them as they stalked down the street. Putting our differences aside, I appreciated their offer to get us to the riverboat. I knew what leaving those younger children behind, even temporarily, must've felt like. Memphis had given them a home, someplace where they felt safe and secure, with others just like them.

I chewed my lip and stared at my adinkra bracelet. Memphis wanted me to share the power the Alkean gods had granted me. But how? And what if something went wrong? No, the best way I could help was to find Cotton and put an end to his schemes. Stop him, stop the coffles, and stop the weird masked people. That's what I had to focus on.

Fog rolled through the alleys and side streets, a lone straggler from the previous night's festivities. It was the perfect cover, which we really needed since Ayanna's injured leg prevented her from moving too fast. She limped beside me as Memphis led us through alley after alley, her face growing more and more troubled as I caught her up on what had happened to me.

"A giant snake told you to warn Mami Wata, and you tried to, but King Cotton appeared at a restaurant?" Ayanna shook her head. "So in other words, just a normal Tristan Strong day."

I rolled my eyes. "Har-har, good one, high five. What about you? How did you end up with Memphis in New Orleans?"

"I got sloppy," she said, embarrassed. "Junior and I got split up about a week ago. We were trying to find Gum Baby, who—how do you deal with her?—had decided to chase after a monster that attacked us."

"I deal with her reluctantly," I muttered, and Ayanna elbowed me. "But we found her."

"Gum Baby?"

I nodded. "Locked in a barge container on the Mississippi. She said she'd been chasing a 'ghostie.' Turned out she meant a coffle."

Ayanna pursed her lips. “Right. Junior and I ran into a trap. Specifically, we ran into two or three of those coffle creatures. I tried to hold them off so we could get away, but one of them got too close and almost took a chunk out of me. To escape, I had to jump into the river.” Her face grew pale as she lost herself in the memory, and I placed a hand on her arm. She inhaled, then smiled and looked at me. “I was in the water for hours, or at least that’s how it felt. Every time I tried to come ashore, those things were waiting for me. Finally I managed to climb aboard an empty barge. As soon as the coast was clear, I swam to shore. There I ran into Memphis trying to keep coffles off the younger kids, and then you showed up.”

“She washed up onto the bank upriver,” Memphis said without turning around.

“Near a dog park,” Ayanna muttered.

Memphis laughed. “Three showers later, she still smelled like a labradoodle. But that ain’t all. Show him what we found the other day.”

Ayanna reached into her back pocket and pulled out a piece of gray plastic. She handed it to me and shuddered, as if she hated even the feel of it. I grabbed it, then paused. Pressed my lips tight together. I’d seen it before. Last night, on the person across the street from the Hideout.

It was a hockey mask with a red slash across it.

Just as Jess had promised, Memphis escorted us through the tiny streets and back alleys of the French Quarter without our so much as hearing another soul. We tiptoed toward the river as the rest of the city slept. If Memphis was still upset about my unwillingness to share my powers, they didn’t show it. Instead, they whispered jokes and gave us an unofficial tour of the city, pointing out spots where odd jobs could be performed, where food could be acquired, and where a sidewalk grate might warm someone on a cold night.

When we reached the edge of the Mississippi, I got an idea. I still had Seraphine’s contact information in my pocket, and I passed it to Memphis. “She’s sort of like me,” I said. Then, waving toward Ayanna, I corrected myself. “Like both of us. Seraphine’s got friends in high places. She said one of them cares for the children no one else sees, so maybe she can help you….”

Memphis seemed startled, then nodded. They clutched the slip of paper like it was an unexpected allowance. The phone number wasn’t an adinkra.

It didn't automatically ensure better days in the future, but it was something. I had to do something. Too many were doing nothing.

No one stopped us on our short trip to the *River Queen.* Ayanna and I borrowed another dinghy—this one with a motor—and managed to pilot our way across the still morning waters without incident. We scrambled aboard, sent the tiny boat back toward land, then tiptoed into the sleeping cabins.

There was an empty one across the hall from mine that Ayanna could settle into. For a second I tried to think up an excuse I could offer as an alibi for my disappearance, since it was now morning and I'd been gone for the whole night. But I'd brought back Ayanna. Whatever punishment Mami Wata wanted to add onto my grounding, it would be worth it. I sighed, then turned to find the others. Might as well get it over with. The sooner I got yelled at for leaving, the sooner I could let everyone know about Cotton, the coffles, and the snake's warning.

But just then Ayanna smiled at me and pulled me into a hug.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"For being you. Stubborn and thickheaded, and more than wrong on a few occasions…"

"Uh…thanks?"

"…but you're always there for your friends. And… well, thank you."

I shrugged, trying to think of something cool to say, but my opportunity was ruined by a loud voice.

"Why is Bumbletongue blushing?" Gum Baby asked as she trotted down the hall. She carried the SBP in both hands like I might carry a stack of books too tall for me to manage. Every time she took a step forward, she staggered to the right or the left, doing her best not to drop the phone. Where had she come from, and how had she gotten her sticky hands on it?

"I'm not blushing," I said, blushing furiously.

Gum Baby leaned in close, studied me, then shrugged. "Gum Baby can't help you until you're ready to help yourself."

"What?"

"Gum Baby knows what you want! It's clear. You and Ayanna, you have a special relationship. You want to carry her things, open doors for her, drive her around, wear a shiny hat and suit and—"

"That sounds like a chauffeur," I interrupted.

“Isn’t that what you want to be?” Gum Baby looked back and forth between Ayanna (who wasn’t helping *at all*, just smothering a laugh with the crook of her elbow) and me.

“No!” I shouted.

“Oh.” Gum Baby looked me up and down again, then offered the SBP, a faint look of disapproval on her face. “You don’t want to carry things?”

I growled something unintelligible and grabbed the phone. She sighed and turned back to Ayanna.

“Sure don’t carry your *own* weight,” she muttered, then patted Ayanna’s good leg. “Gum Baby should’ve known, seeing how she had to drag his dusty suitcases into his room earlier. Some people. C’mon, Gum Baby needs to have a talk with you. Alone. No boys out loud.”

“You mean *allowed*?” I called after her as they entered the other cabin.

“No, out loud!” Gum Baby said, starting to close the door.

I shook my head, then glanced down at the SBP. Anansi was on the screen, but he hadn’t said anything this whole time. The trickster god was studying the Maps app, trying to locate more alerts. I watched him for a minute or so, not wanting to break his concentration. I hadn’t seen him smile in weeks, not since we’d returned from Alke and Junior went missing. I couldn’t even remember the last time he’d tried to be sneaky.

It was concerning.

“Anansi, are you—”

“Busy,” he grunted.

“What?”

“I’m busy. Trying to find our people.” He didn’t look at me as he enlarged a cross section of the Mississippi River and the cities along it, but I felt the accusation in his words.

“I’m trying, too,” I said. “I found

Ayanna!” Anansi snorted. “Of course.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He exited out of the Maps app and whirled around to face me. “It means you didn’t *find* her—you stumbled upon her while kicking dust around out there. It means there are hundreds of others waiting to be rescued, but of course you find the girl who…” He trailed off and stomped up the side of the screen to a web in the corner.

“The girl who what?” I asked, getting angry now. “What’re you trying to say?”

He didn’t answer.

“Anansi?”

“Did you find any clues about Junior?” His voice was quiet, his arm slung over his eyes as the web hammock swayed back and forth.

I thought back to Cotton and the black-and-gold stone he had offered as proof. And what Ayanna had said about her and Junior getting separated. “Yes, but—”

“But there was something you felt was more important, right?”

There was no good answer to that question. I opened my mouth, closed it, then tried to pick my way through the verbal land mines. “Not *more* important, but if I didn’t—”

“If you didn’t do something, something only you were capable of doing… danger, calamity, catastrophe, right?” Anansi lifted his arm and looked at me. Exhaustion lined his face, and he waved an arm toward the stairs behind me. “Well, you’re in luck, because you’re needed once more. Mami Wata’s waiting for you up on deck. Maybe freshen up before seeing her—show at least one god some respect.”

I tried to explain one more time. “Anansi—”

“Just leave the phone in the room, boy. You’re not supposed to have it, and I need to rest.”

I sighed. The screen turned off and I stood there staring at my reflection in the Alkean glass. That could’ve gone better. I dropped the phone on the bed in my suite, waited one more second for a joke, a smile, a wink that never came, then quickly grabbed some new clothes and went to change. I’d come back and talk to Anansi later, right after I delivered the warning.

And maybe after all this was done, I could guard the mermaid carvings or something. Can’t lose a friend if they’re fastened to the wall.

The *River Queen* churned upriver as I climbed onto the deck. I stopped for a few seconds to watch the opposite bank go by in a blur. It was impressive, really. Not sure what I expected, seeing as the only other riverboat I’d ridden on had been Keelboat Annie’s, but a vessel that moved like a Lamborghini wasn’t at the top of the list.

Someone cleared their throat. Mami Wata was waiting for me with her arms crossed. She wore a navy dress that swirled around her ankles even when she wasn’t moving. Silver earrings dangled from her ears, and her hair was piled in an elegant flourish atop her head, a blue-and-silver head

wrap keeping it steady. The deck of the *River Queen* gleamed in the sun, banishing all shadows for the foreseeable future, but the goddess's furious expression could've spawned thunderclouds. I took a deep breath and walked up to her. Let the lecture come—it was what I deserved.

But she surprised me.

"We need your help" was all she said before turning and marching to the opposite end of the steamship, calling out commands to the vessel as she went. I followed, confused. She led me down a service ladder that barely skirted the massive paddle wheel and onto a platform that seemed to float just above the water. Occasionally the Mississippi would rise in a soft splash against the worn wood, as if saying hello. There, Mami Wata stood with her arms folded and eyes closed. Waiting, I realized. On me?

I shuffled my feet. "Um, I know I was supposed to be grounded and—" Her hand rose sharply, cutting off my words. Mami Wata's eyes were closed and her face cocked to the side. She was listening to something, or so I thought. But when she spoke, I realized she was listening to *someone.*

"He's here," she said.

I looked around. "Who's here?"

She didn't answer. Instead, her hand fell in a helpless sort of gesture. "The boy means well, but he's stubborn. Are you sure you want to…" Her voice trailed off, and she remained still. Listening again, I guessed. I was at a loss and also concerned that I was eavesdropping. Maybe it was time for me to mosey on back up the ladder and finish being grounded.

"Okay," I said. "I'm just going to—"

Mami Wata's hand reached out and closed around my wrist like a vise. Her eyes flashed and she nodded at the white-capped river behind the churning paddle. "He's ready to talk to you."

I glanced behind her, then cleared my throat. "Who?"

She sighed. "Use the powers given to you, Tristan. I can sense the request but not the content. You must speak with him. And quickly. We need to know what has transpired up ahead—I do not wish to enter the situation ill-informed."

I glanced from the river to her, and back to the river. Then it clicked. There was a spirit nearby. *That's* who she was talking to, and who apparently wanted to talk to me now. I grinned. "Oh! Of course."

She nodded and began to climb back up the ladder. "Remember, it must be quick."

“Okay, I will. Let me just…” I reached for the Isihlangu spirit bead.

“Can you hear me?” a trembling voice asked.

The words cut through the paddle’s splashing and the *River Queen’s* creaking. I paused. My fingers hadn’t even touched the spirit bead yet. I licked my lips nervously, then glanced up.

A man stood on the deck of a small, dilapidated river ferry that was floating right next to us. The boat looked like the next swell of the Mississippi would split it into waterlogged pieces of lumber. The man wore an old, beat-up boater hat and a pair of suspenders that were failing at the one job required of them.

And I could see right through him.

He took off his hat, squinted upriver, then turned back. “Can you hear me?” he repeated.

“Yes,” I said after swallowing a couple times. Why did this keep happening to me? I wasn’t touching the spirit bead, and yet I could see the ferryman clear as day. “Yes, I can hear you.”

“Good,” he said. “’Cause you don’t have much time. Turn this boat around and get out of here. You don’t know what you’re doing. You don’t walk up to a door and enter Angola. More likely than not, you end up on Angola land without even realizing it. The air just feels different. Angry. Old. It ain’t like them steel-and-glass buildings in the comics or the movies, neither. No sir, the sun sits right on your neck as do your time down in Old Angola.

“Don’t get me wrong, now, there was some bad men in there. Did some awful things. Terrible things. But you know what? Bad men are still men, you understand? Still men. You don’t lock up a man for thirty years with nothing but his shadow and the kiss of cool concrete as his companions. You don’t send a man out to pick cotton by hand, eighteen hours out of the day, no matter the weather. There’s a lot of broken souls littered around Old Angola.

“So you be careful. The spirits is angry. Angry! They anchored to the place that leashed them and broke them, and it’s gonna take more than a shiny promise to get them to move on.”

The fear in his warning pierced through the questions I wanted to ask. He looked at his hat as if surprised to see it off his head, then wrung it like a rag as he stared nervously upriver again. What could frighten a spirit? He was already dead…. Nothing could hurt him. Right?

“So…” I tried to digest what he was saying. Angola? The country in Africa?

“Just turn around,” he begged. “It won’t let us go. We already stuck here, doing the best we can, and now it wants more and more and won’t let us remember the little bit of our lives we got left. It’s eating everything and won’t let us go!”

Mami Wata’s voice carried down to me. “Tristan! Should we keep going?”

The spirit trembled, repeating his last words over and over. “Won’t let us go. Won’t let us go…”

“Tristan?”

I began to tell her to turn the *River Queen* around when the spirit looked at me. “He won’t let us go.”

He?

“Who?” I asked. “Cotton? Is it a haint? Is he the one who’s scaring you? Tell me where he is. I can take care of him.” The words poured out of me, fierce and full of determination. But the spirit didn’t notice. He and his ferry just faded away slowly as he repeated the warning over and over.

“Won’t let us go…”

Mami Wata peered down over the edge at me. “Tristan, did you hear me?”

I stared at the spot where the ferryman had disappeared, then shook myself. His instruction to turn around couldn’t have been clearer.

But Cotton.

“Keep going!” I finally shouted back up. Mami Wata’s lips pressed together into a thin line, but she nodded and the paddle wheel groaned as it began to churn faster. I chewed the inside of my cheek, trying and failing to ignore the flutter of worry at the bottom of my stomach even as I turned toward the ladder. “We have to keep going.”

I climbed to the top deck, still deep in thought. Why was the spirit so scared of a place called Angola? And why did the ferryman think I was someone it needed to warn? Did he have me confused with some relative? I mulled over the thought for a moment, then dismissed it. I could worry about that later. Right now I had to figure out what Cotton was up to in the area and put a stop to the haint’s designs.

“Oof!”

I'd bumped into Mami Wata. "Sorry, I was distracted. Have you seen Ayanna? I brought her here and…"

My words slipped away. Mami Wata hadn't even acknowledged me. She stood near the edge of the *River Queen,* both hands gripping the wooden guardrail as her nails gouged the surface. The goddess's teeth were clenched and her eyes firmly shut as her whole body trembled with effort.

"Mami Wata?" I asked slowly. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes fluttered open, and I took a step back from the twin pools of swirling gray staring back at me, just as Ayanna shouted something from the front of the boat.

"Everything," Mami Wata said.

The steamship rounded the bend, and the tree-lined riverbank gave way to tangled weeds and brown grass. The sun sat heavily on my shoulders and forced me to squint to see what was up ahead. At first I struggled to identify it—a sprawling landscape with whitewashed buildings collected inside an industrial fence. But if the guards on horseback didn't give it away, the line of people chained together in the distance quickly brought me up to speed.

"A prison," I said faintly. "Angola is a prison."

# 10
# ANGOLA

**WHAT WOULD COTTON WANT FROM A PRISON?**

"Tristan?"

Ayanna moved up beside me. She held the SBP in her right hand, extended so the screen faced Angola. "Anansi said he felt something and wanted to come up and look," she said. "Do you think the prison guards will try to stop us? Are we allowed to get this close?"

The *River Queen* felt whatever it was, too. Several of the wooden mermaid carvings above the waterline glared or grimaced and shifted to the opposite side of the steamship, as if shielding themselves from the aura permeating everything.

"I think…" I said after studying the prison for a few moments, "the guards assume we're something else. 'The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.' Just a ferry passing through."

"You might be right, my boy," Anansi said. "We should keep it that way."

I looked down at the phone. Ayanna handed it over, and I flipped it to see Anansi chewing on his lip. "There's something real dangerous in these parts. It's making all six of my legs itch. I think the farther we get from this place, the better. What do you think, Wata?"

Mami Wata had moved up alongside us, and though her eyes had gone back to their normal color, the tension hadn't drained out of her body. She studied the prison, then nodded. "I agree. We cannot stay here. The water, it… it cries."

I clenched my fists, then forced myself to uncurl each finger one at a time, until I was sure I could speak without my voice trembling. "No. Both the snake and the ferryman mentioned Angola. Cotton has to be here."

"Leave Cotton to your elders, boy," Anansi snapped. He took a deep breath, then tried again. "We've delayed the search for the missing Alkeans long enough. And something in the area is interfering with the phone's alerts. We have to move on."

I looked at Mami Wata. She nodded. "If we linger here, I fear we'll draw the wrong attention. The current is fighting me most strongly, as if desperate to hold us in place."

Ayanna placed a hand on my shoulder. When I looked at her, her apologetic expression sent my already low morale even lower. "Maybe they're right."

"Gum Baby ain't scared," the tiny doll muttered as she climbed up into my hoodie. "But she's a team player, so if y'all wanna leave…"

Everyone looked at me. I turned and stared out over the water. Were they right? Could I have misheard the snake? Could the warning have been a red herring placed by Cotton to keep us off the trail of his real objectives? I just didn't know anymore.

"Fine," I said. "I don't see anything, so

maybe…" Wait…. Was that it?

"Tristan?" Ayanna called my name and gave me a little shove. "You all right? You spaced out there for a minute."

"I can't see anything," I repeated.

"Yes, we know."

"No, I don't think you do." I turned to Mami Wata. "You *feel* something, don't you? You said it was the currents trying to keep you in place. Wouldn't currents try to wash us back downriver?"

Mami Wata frowned. "Yes, but—"

I whirled around, forgetting that Gum Baby was still in my hood and nearly tipping her out. Ignoring her threats, I focused on the river ahead of us. I closed my eyes and squeezed the Isihlangu spirit bead. Then I opened them again.

My breath whooshed out of my lungs as if someone had just sucker punched me.

"Tristan?"

It couldn't be. It wasn't possible.

"Tristan!" Ayanna was next to me, grabbing me by the shoulders. Gum Baby smacked me across the face a couple of times to snap me out of the daze, but the real jolt was what loomed high in the sky around the prison.

Water splashed onto my face. Mami Wata stood over me, another wave of river water dangling threateningly in midair. The goddess eyed me. "What is it?"

My mouth opened and closed. How could I help the others see it?

*The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.*

That was it. I had to show everyone what I saw, as if they were looking through my eyes. Maybe I could do it with the spirit bead. I grabbed Ayanna's hand, stuffed Gum Baby back into my hood, and took Mami Wata's hand as well.

"What—" Ayanna began.

"Trust me," I said.

She wrinkled her brow but didn't say anything more. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I needed to link us. Form a connection between the four of us (yes, I was including Gum Baby) that held tighter than any chain or coffle ever could. I thought of Alke and the magic we all possessed, granted by the land that was destroyed but we all still carried in our hearts.

*See what I see*, I implored.

I opened my eyes.

Ayanna gasped, her hand squeezing mine in shock. Mami Wata frowned in concentration as she surveyed what lay across the river. And Gum Baby?

"Now, Gum Baby knows that violates all sorts of zoning regulations." The little doll stood on my shoulder with her hands on her hips, a pair of fake eyeglasses having appeared suddenly on the top of her head. "Gum Baby needs to start issuing some citations."

A monstrous, nearly see-through house was superimposed over the prison.

Its columns propped up a warped, slanted roof, and swirling gray pools of smoke replaced the windows. A sagging second-floor balcony nearly obscured the main entrance, where bloodred brick stairs led to double doors

of splintered bone, like the tongue of some wild, ravenous beast running along its teeth.

As I realized what this meant, I felt sick to my stomach. Beyond angry. Helpless. All at the same time. The house I was seeing was Old Angola, a long-gone plantation. Angola the prison had been built on the very same spot.

This is what Mami Wata's snake had been trying to warn me about. And the spirit of the ferry. Both had said that the dead were furious.

The spectral plantation was still haunting the land, devouring any and all nearby spirits. Bright trails of smoke coiled out of every door and window, every crack and seam. They wiggled through the air like tentacles, some questing for prey, others dragging victims inside. I couldn't hear the spirits' screams, but the looks on the faces of those who disappeared into the maw of the house would be seared into my brain forever.

And, I saw too late, several long tendrils had wrapped themselves around the *River Queen.*

*Trapped.*

The single word flitted through the inside of my head like a bird in a cage. We were stuck in the middle of the Mississippi, at the shallowest section of the bend in the river, with a spectral plantation latched on to us like a kraken wrapped around a ship at sea.

Mami Wata strode to the front of the *River Queen,* both arms outstretched as she summoned every ounce of power from the water to propel us forward. The giant paddle groaned as it scraped the bottom of the riverbed, while the wooden mermaid carvings leaned as if trying to tow the boat free.

None of it worked.

"It's too shallow!" Mami Wata shouted as she moved past us and descended to the lower deck. "I'm going to see how badly damaged the paddle is."

That left me and Ayanna alone.

Well, not quite.

"Hey!" A sap ball bounced off my ear. I growled something rude under my breath as Gum Baby slid down from my shoulder. "Y'all trip buddies now?"

It was only then that I realized that Ayanna and I were still holding hands. Gum Baby dropped into a toddler squat and raised one charcoal-drawn eyebrow at me. I blushed and Ayanna rolled her eyes as we stood there awkwardly.

“Anyway,” I said, a bit too loudly, “this has got to be what the snake warned me about.”

“Mmhmm,” Gum Baby said.

“Hush and take Ayanna’s other hand,” I told her. “I have more to show you. See how the plantation fields overlay the exact dimensions of the prison fields?”

Ayanna nodded. “And look at the guards.”

The prison’s sentries, still riding horses, trotted slowly along the fields where the living human prisoners labored. But with the help of the Isihlangu bead, we also saw grotesque spirit creatures connected to the ghostly plantation by translucent braided ropes, as if they were marionettes and the house was the puppet master. The creatures reminded me of centaurs, except with six legs instead of four, and two bulky arms that hung nearly to the ground. They walked the same paths as the human guards, and the similarity in how they watched their charges began to creep me out.

But what did all this have to do with Cotton? Had he awoken the spirit plantation as he had the Maafa, the evil sentient slave ship from Alke? Was he trapped inside it? If so, good riddance.

The *River Queen* groaned, then shuddered and began to move—sideways.

“What was that?” I asked, running to the edge.

“Tristan, look out!” Ayanna shoved me down, and we both went tumbling as a massive spirit tentacle swept overhead. “It’s pulling us to shore! We’ll be stranded and— Mami Wata!”

The goddess stood in the middle of the water, waves surging around her as several tentacles tried to encircle her. They lashed at her, dove beneath her, and even tried to coil around her like a python squeezing its prey. Her arms trembled with the effort of raising wave after wave to fend off the attacks.

Gum Baby was running along the second-floor guardrails, firing sap ball after sap ball at the tentacles and complaining when her missiles went straight through them.

“Unfair!”

“How in the world?!”

“Y’all cheating!”

I scrambled to my feet and sprinted to the other side of the ship. Furrows of sand bunched up as the bottom of the boat began to get stranded on the riverbank.

Ayanna appeared at my side, pointing up the shore some thirty yards away. “Oh no.”

“What?” I looked in that direction, then froze. “Sweet peaches.”

A section of the prison—a squat one-story building separate from everything else—appeared to be merging with several of the tentacles from the spirit plantation. Trails of gray and black smoke wound between the cinder blocks, which glowed briefly before the entire thing began to shudder like an earthquake had just hit. Giant gray bricks fell from the structure, dislodged by whatever force was shaking the land.

I’d never witnessed evil come to life before. The fetterlings and bone ships back in Alke were already terrorizing MidPass when I fell through the sky. The Maafa had also existed prior to my arrival. By the time Bear, under the venomous influence of King Cotton’s mask, had kidnapped Mami Wata and was holding her captive in the burned-out remains of the Thicket, the Tree of Power had already been poisoned by the remains of iron monsters. I’d always thought evil wasn’t created—it respawned.

So to see the plantation’s tentacles—the ones not currently dragging spirits into the darkness behind its doors—wrap around part of the prison, pull it apart, and reconstruct it into something even more horrific made fear take root in my chest, where it couldn’t be dislodged.

Colossal cinder-block legs formed, thicker than tree trunks.

Metal bars twisted around stone to make a giant rib cage.

Two iron grilles turned into eyes, and a thick, bolt-studded metal door served as its mouth.

And, perhaps most terrifying, a copper-red discharge leaked from the cinder blocks around the eyes, making it look like the creature wept blood. As the tentacles finished their assembly and withdrew, the monster shook itself to life with a roar that sounded like an eternity of car crashes, and it turned to fix its gaze on me. I couldn’t help myself—I stepped back, afraid.

“Ah, I see you’re admiring my latest creation.”

The voice, slick and smug, came from across the river. My fists clenched instinctively. Ayanna inhaled sharply. “Is that—?”

“Old Lint Ball himself,” Gum Baby said, her voice tight with anger.

Cotton stood on the dilapidated porch of the plantation. He wore old-fashioned riding pants, high black boots, and a beige dinner jacket over a white linen shirt. His hair was swept back, and I could see a hat in his hands.

“He looks… normal,” Ayanna said.

“If he gets closer, we’ll use the spirit sight,” I whispered. “Don’t let him fool you.”

“He ain’t foolin’ nobody!” Gum Baby shouted. “Gum Baby put him away once—she can do it again.” She began to leap down from the boat, but I caught her and shook my head.

“Wait…. Something isn’t right.”

Cotton laughed. I didn’t know how he could hear us, or how I could hear him as if he was standing right next to me. The haint hopped down off the porch and began strolling toward us through the high grass. As he walked, tentacles from the house writhed and swirled on either side of him, an eldritch escort. Watching them made my stomach twist. He and the plantation were the architects of so much pain. Combined, what further evil could they accomplish? My eyes flicked to the cinder-block giant watching me from the prison grounds. I guessed I was about to find out.

Cotton stopped just beyond the crest of the riverbank, his hands in his pockets and a wicked grin on his face. Seconds later, a sap ball went whizzing across the water, aimed directly at the haint’s head. Just before it reached him, a tentacle snaked out from behind him and slapped the projectile aside. Cotton rolled his eyes.

“Come now, can’t we be civil?” he asked.

“What—” I began to ask.

“Let me be civil upside your head again, Lint Face!” Gum Baby hurled another sap ball, and she was preparing a sap balloon when Ayanna restrained her and tried to calm her down.

Cotton’s smile faded as he stared at Gum Baby. She’d been the one to trap the haint and send him to the bottom of the Burning Sea. From the look of pure loathing on his face, he hadn’t forgotten.

“You can’t hide forever!” I called out to him. “I’ve got a nice blue haint bottle with your name on it. Had my nana pick one out.”

Ayanna wore a strange, confused expression. Gum Baby eyed me warily. Mami Wata was still fighting off tentacles, splashing them against

the far bank while avoiding the clutches of others. Her energy was flagging, however, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. Cotton grinned as he began to pace leisurely back and forth along the crest of the riverbank.

"Tristan, my boy, what makes you think I'm hiding from you? I'm *grateful* to you! You're the one who brought me to this world."

"Liar!" I shouted.

Cotton raised his hands. "Now why would I lie about this? You freed me and some of my good friends, and you took us to Alke. Then you brought Alke here. Well, I'd like to repay the favor. I've got some business to attend to up north, but I can't leave here without extending some good old-fashioned Southern hospitality. Let me introduce you to one of my new friends. Show 'em, darling."

This last statement was directed at the plantation house. It shuddered, and then hundreds, maybe thousands, of new tentacles erupted from every crack and crevice. They shot into the air, writhing like worms on hot pavement. Then, to my disgust, they came down as one…

… straight into the metal mouth of the stationary cinder-block creature. The monster roared as it was infused with the spirit of the plantation. Once the prison creature had sucked in most of the house's hazy smoke, it took a step forward.

"Um," Ayanna said, "Tristan?"

Cotton started laughing. The monster took another stride, then another, and Cotton walked toward it. The creature bent over and offered him a crumbling cinder-block hand. Cotton stepped onto it and the monster lifted him up.

Only the faintest trace of the house lingered now—nothing more than wisps of smoke. The plantation had been consumed, and the creature that had ingested it looked angry enough to destroy everything in its path.

That meant us.

"Tristan?" Ayanna called. "We need to help Mami Wata! She's tiring."

The prison monster stomped up to us, Cotton now riding on its neck. The haint leaned over with both hands under his chin, his elbows propped on the creature's head.

"Tristan, meet Old Angola, my ticket out of here. Old Angola,

Tristan." "You can't run forever, Cotton!" I shouted.

He smirked. "Go ahead and try to chase me. Unless you don't want the death of a goddess on your hands. But then again, everyone around you is

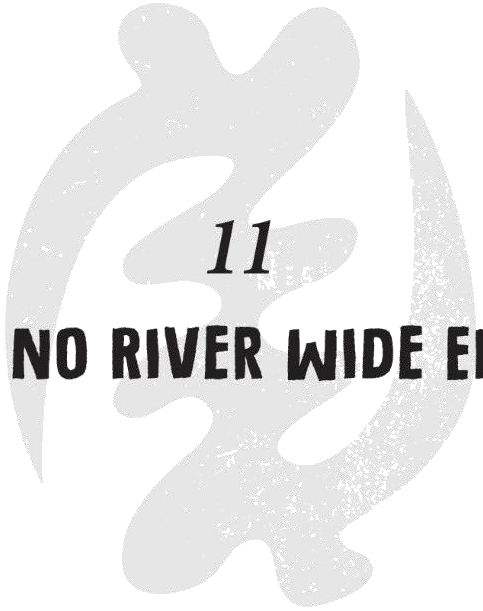
always dying…. Maybe you're like me and you don't care."

"Tristan, come here!" Ayanna shouted. She hopped over the side of the *River Queen* and began to wade to where Mami Wata was staggering in the river shallows.

"Poor Tristan," Cotton said with a shrug. He started to whistle as the prison monster—Old Angola—began to stomp upriver. "Always a step behind. Don't worry, though! I'll find your friends and make sure to tell them…"

He turned, and, just before his evil steed disappeared around the bend ahead, I once again saw the horrific true form of the haint underneath the disguise. Complete with his burning hatred and desire for power.

"…I'll tell them you send your regards."



# 11
# HAINT NO RIVER WIDE ENOUGH

**I USED TO PLAY THE SUPERPOWER GAME WITH EDDIE WHEN WE** were bored. You know, the one where you take turns selecting a highly specific, sometimes silly act and claim it as your ultimate ability.

For example, Eddie used to say his superpower was being able to scoop out the perfect amount of peanut butter when he was making a sandwich. Regardless of whether he was using a spoon or a knife, or the PB was crunchy or creamy. “I am a FORCE!” he used to shout when making a snack after school.

Me? My superpower isn’t as filling, but it’s definitely useful. I can tell when a person is going to lose it. Get furious, explode in a rage, blow a gasket… I know all the signs. Our neighbors back in Chicago loved me, because I could predict when their toddler was about to throw a tantrum, and I’d always head him off.

Eddie used to think it was funny. We’d go to the corner store and he’d point to a group of people and ask me who was going to start an argument first. He marveled that my pick was always right, and he would jot down notes for his future graphic-novel scripts. He thought it was some kind of psychological trick I’d learned from a comic book. I let him believe that. I didn’t have the heart to tell him the real source of my predictive powers.

It was easy to tell who was angry. I saw the same signs every morning when I looked in the mirror.

Now, as Ayanna left Mami Wata's cabin, I knew she was upset. I watched her go down the hall and into another room without saying a word.

"You going after her?" Anansi asked from his seat in the middle of the SBP's screen.

"Should I?" I asked.

We'd just managed to get the *River Queen* moving again after several hours of repairs. Leaks had popped up belowdecks, and the paddle wheel had been knocked off-kilter. Maybe I could go double-check that the steamship was okay. Triple-check if needed.

But Anansi gave me an *Of course* look. "Absolutely. Can't work out a two-person problem by your lonesome."

"I don't know…."

"Look, either you go talk to her or I will the next time I see her, and I'll tell her all about those little speeches you got saved on here."

My heart skipped a beat. "You wouldn't."

The ghost of a smile crossed the trickster god's lips, the first I'd seen since we'd arrived from Alke.

"Those were private!"

"Should've read the terms and conditions, my boy. Terms and conditions."

I pushed off the pillar I'd been leaning against. "I'm gonna tell Nyame to reboot you when I see him again. Turn you into a walkie-talkie." With that, I shoved the phone deep into my pocket and followed Ayanna.

She'd entered the meeting room where I'd been grounded, and when I walked in, she was staring at a bundle of rolled-up documents. She didn't acknowledge me. Instead, she unfurled a giant map, trying to hold down the ends as she studied it.

I pulled out the SBP and dropped it on the top left corner. "Here, let me help," I said.

Ayanna nodded, still not speaking.

I sighed. "How's Mami Wata doing?"

Ayanna bit her lip. "Okay. She's doing okay. Tired. Holding off all those angry spirits, on top of keeping the *River Queen* running, drained her." She closed her eyes. "She's just…tired."

Mami Wata wasn't the only one. I could see that exhaustion had settled on the former pilot's shoulders like a cloak.

"Ayanna," I began, "I—"

"I had a friend once," she interrupted. "A close

friend." Oh. *Oh.*

"We went through pilot training together, built our rafts together. He was the best I'd ever seen. But when the iron monsters came, something changed in him. He got angry. So angry, all the time. And look, we all were upset, but he… It was like he couldn't stand even the thought of them. He began to hunt them down. And it got so bad that eventually the iron monsters figured it out. Whenever he was inside the Thicket, fetterlings would gather outside it like moths to a flame. They wouldn't screech or attack—they just stood there, silent and creepy."

Ayanna leaned on the table, her head bowed. "One day he couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to go out and kill them, and I didn't, and we argued about it. He flew into a rage, took his raft, and left. We heard fighting and went out after him, but by then it was too late. The fetterlings used his anger against him, and I lost a friend. The Thicket lost a great pilot."

Ayanna fell silent and I took a deep breath. I knew what it felt like to lose a friend, and to feel at fault, as if I could've done something that might have prevented his absence. It ate at you. Like a wolf on the inside, chewing away at your heart.

"Ayanna, I'm not—"

But she cut me off again. "Cotton is doing the same thing, Tristan. The same thing! He's baiting you. Making you so angry you can't think! And then you go off after him without considering your safety or the safety of others." She finally looked at me. Her eyes were red and angry. "And people get hurt."

I didn't know how to respond. She wasn't wrong. Mami Wata was now weakened because I had fallen into Cotton's trap. Terrence was scarred—if not physically, then mentally—because I hadn't been able to control the akofena's fire.

I thought about Cotton astride Old Angola, and the chaos and carnage the haint could leave in his wake. Just the idea of it forced my fingers to clench into fists, and I had to flatten my hands on the giant table. I needed to stop him… but how could I without risking my friends' lives?

The *River Queen* shuddered, jarring me out of my head. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll try to stay in control from now on. Promise.”

Ayanna watched me, unsure. I raised my right hand and stood at attention, then crossed my heart with my left hand. “Promise,” I repeated.

The boat shook again and I sighed. “And if you take over the steering from Gum Baby, I promise not to throw her overboard.”

That drew a smile, and some of the tension drained from the room. Ayanna shook her head. “Leaving her alone in the pilothouse is another strike against you. Honestly, you’re one bad move away from a mutiny.”

I pointed at the map. “So let’s figure out the next move together. You can pilot this thing, right?”

“Boy, I can pilot whatever I choose. I’m fine—you clean your own house.” She folded her arms and glared at me in mock severity. “You tell me where we’re going, and I’ll get us there. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I barked, throwing a salute that almost knocked me out. We grinned, and just for a moment, for one second out of what seemed like an eternity of suffering, things felt good.

Gum Baby muttered slightly frightening threats when we relieved her of duty, but I distracted her by handing her a mini banjo I’d found in a tiny display in one of the suites. “Just no ‘Ballad of the Gummy,’” I said, inwardly cringing at the prospect.

Gum Baby scampered out onto the roof-deck and proceeded to pluck some notes with serious aggression. Why was everything so angry with her? And how she got that tiny instrument to make such a loud racket, I’ll never know.

There was nothing but wide-open river ahead for miles, so I let her play a concert for a horrified Anansi while I strolled over to the other side of the boat. I sat down, dangled my legs over the edge, and stared off into nothing. Sometimes you just have to turn off your brain.

Fields of green and brown grew across the river. We chugged past them all, the bright blue sky and the warmth of the sun nearly enough to fool me into thinking this was a normal trip. The last leg of a summer vacation. Hopefully Granddad and Nana had made it back to the farm okay. I knew Ayanna had seen them, but—

*WHUMP!*

The SBP landed on the deck a few feet behind me and slid toward the edge of the boat. I stopped the phone before it could tumble off. Anansi sneered in the middle of the screen.

"You can get mad all you want—that was the wrong chord!" he called back to Gum Baby.

A sap ball hit the screen.

I sighed and wiped the SBP clean with my shirt. Glad to see we were all getting along.

"Did you talk to Ayanna?" Anansi asked.

"Yeah," I said, my attention back on the fields across the river. More farms. Were some of them former plantations?

"Went that well, huh? No matter. You two will work it

out." "There's nothing to work out," I snapped.

"Of course. Keep telling yourself that. Just like there's nothing going on with your powers and your *inability* to control them. Right?" Anansi shook his head and then jumped up, grabbed the bottom of the Contacts app, and started doing pull-ups.

"What are you doing?" I asked after a few seconds of watching.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Did you see Old Angola? I'm getting into shape. Been lazing about for too long." He climbed up between the Contacts app and the Diaspor-app, propping himself on both arms as he started a set of tricep dips. Every time he exhaled, a tired emoji appeared and floated to the top of the screen. Anansi paused after ten reps. "Being cooped up in this digital time-out has slowed my instincts. You do your boxing training even if you don't have a match coming up, right?"

"Yeah…"

"Same thing applies for me. And for you, it's twice as

important." "Why?"

"Because that haint has put a target on your back, boy! Listen, I know I told you before to let the grown folks worry about him, but after that mess back downriver, everybody needs to step up. You most of all. You're also the one the spirits are talking to, and you're the one Alke is relying on to rebuild it! Don't you see? You can't sit back and expect it all to work out."

I threw up my hands. This was getting too confusing. "So I can't sit out the fight, but if I fight, I put other people at risk!" The memory of black flames engulfing the barge rose before me, and I tried to blink it away.

“No one said don’t fight—it’s about staying in control. That’s what training does. Ask for help when you need it, but remember, people, spirits, and even gods are counting on you to fix this. So fix it!”

He stared at me for several seconds with a stern expression until another loud banjo pluck forced him to cringe. “Send me back over there, and you think about what I said, will you?”

I slid the phone across the deck, my thoughts a mess. Everybody seemed to want me to do something different, and their advice and instructions were pulling me in opposite directions. I felt like a giant rubber band. What scared me was what would happen when I finally snapped.

Anansi started shouting at Gum Baby before he’d even reached her. The tiny doll just played louder.

“Don’t come over here starting something, Web Butt,” she warned.

“I need to start wearing earplugs, the way you’re playing. Did you even tune that thing?”

“Gum Baby’s gonna tune your face with some sweet chin music if you keep talking.”

I ignored their argument and turned back to the fields across the river. Anansi’s words echoed in my mind as I watched the wind bend the grass. He was right, of course, but something about his pep talk worried me. It was almost like he was questioning my commitment to Alke and the folks still missing. His son was included in that group, after all. A new note had been lurking in his voice—doubt.

Anansi was starting to lose faith in his Anansesem.

Shame washed over me. The Anansi adinkra was the first one I’d received, sent to me from beyond the grave by my best friend. Was I no longer worthy of it? I stared at my hands and the bracelet on my wrist. No. I couldn’t accept that. I could do better. I could *be* better. If I needed to learn control, I would practice. Starting right then.

The music and the argument and everything else faded away as I closed my eyes and clenched my— No, not the shadow gloves. Not yet. I would try the spirit bead. When I opened my eyes, the world took on a foggy look, as if I were peering through a steamy shower door, and all of a sudden I wished I’d done this sooner.

Spirits were fleeing downriver.

Ghosts of Black folk from generations past ran alongside the riverbank. Mothers. Fathers. Children. They clutched their belongings and each other.

They kept glancing back fearfully, as if they were being chased, but I couldn't see anything behind them. The river curved just up ahead. Had Cotton stopped near here to let his pet giant gobble up more spirits? If so, I'd be ready for him this time.

One of the spirits—an older girl with two younger children in tow—noticed me watching. She frantically waved her arms for me to follow them as they ran behind the others, who disappeared after thirty feet or so. The girl stopped for a moment and pleaded to me with her eyes. It was like she wanted to protect me, to take me with her… to where, I didn't know, but someplace other than where the *River Queen* was headed. We stared at each other, me confused and her terrified.

"Tristan!" Gum Baby's shout startled me, and I jerked around. She was pointing straight ahead. "You need to see this!"

"Okay," I said, scrambling to my feet. When I glanced back at the bank, the spirit girl was gone, but the look on her face stuck with me.

What was she so afraid of?

Chaos awaited us. Just around the bend, a large sandbar split the Mississippi in two. Three riverboats—smaller steamers with only one paddle and boxy, windowless cabins—looked like they'd collided and run aground on the sandy island. One of the boats, white with a single red stripe painted along the hull, had overturned. The two other boats were gray and listless, though they didn't look like they'd sustained damage. The area was silent, and the sun beamed down on us as we drifted to a stop and took in the accident scene.

"Where is everyone?" Ayanna asked. "The passengers. Did they…?"

She didn't finish, but I knew what she was going to say. "I don't know," I said. "We should stop and see if they need help."

Gum Baby stomped toward us, her tiny banjo slung over her back. "Sapsolutely not, Bumbletongue. Ain't got time for your heroics. Gum Baby knows a trap when she sees one. Shoot, Gum Baby invented this trap. It's the old Tricky Sticky."

We all stared at her.

"The what?" I asked.

"You heard me. The Tricky Sticky. Find your mark, pretend you're stuck, then *SAP-SAP*, you go upside their head before they know what hit 'em."

Anansi opened his mouth, then closed it. Ayanna shook her head. I took a deep breath, getting ready to argue, then paused and cocked an ear.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"Help!"

A faint cry was coming from the overturned boat.

I dove off the side of the *River Queen* in an instant. Concerned shouts came from the deck, but I pushed away from Mami Wata's boat and swam to the sandbar. The overturned steamer looked none the worse for wear, other than, you know, being upside down.

I knocked on the hull. "Hello? Anyone in there?"

Whispers floated on the wind. I looked around me, confused. One of the beached gray boats looked a bit closer than it had before. I frowned.

"Boy! Help me, quick!"

I turned to see a sharp, severe-looking woman lying on the sand. She had bobbed silver hair and was wearing a white pantsuit. Her skin was gray and nearly translucent, so see-through it reminded me of old milk beginning to separate. One of her legs appeared to be trapped beneath the overturned boat, and her sand-covered face had tear tracks running down it.

"Help me, quickly now!" She held out a hand with the practiced ease of someone who expected to be obeyed. She was stuck but didn't look too put out about it, despite her pleas for help.

"Where are you?" Ayanna's shout cut across the water.

I started to turn, but the woman flapped her hand at me.

"Come now, boy, what are you waiting for? My other leg to suffer the same fate?"

I shook my head and grabbed her hand. I winced at how cold it was. Must've been from being dumped in the water.

"Sorry, Miss…"

"*Mrs.* Mrs. Roller. But I suppose you can just call me Patty," the woman said. "Everybody else does."

"Mrs. Roller, I mean Patty, shouldn't I try to shift the boat so you can __"

"Nonsense. Just pull me. Big strong boy like you, I'll be free in no time." Patty smiled, a thin-lipped quirk of the mouth that didn't look happy at all. Then again, she was probably hurt. I tugged, and she scooted forward and got to her feet. Easily.

“Thank you, Tristan. I never could’ve freed myself without your help,” Patty said, holding on to my arm with one hand and brushing sand off her face with the other.

Alarm bells rang in my head. “How did you know my name?” She froze.

My eyes went to the spot where she’d just been lying. Under the overturned ship I could now see a shallow trench. She hadn’t been stuck at all.

“Tristan, the boats!” called Ayanna. “Look out!”

This time I did turn around. The other two gray vessels—the ones I thought were beached on the sandbar—had miraculously launched themselves and now cut off my retreat to the *River Queen*. When I turned back around, Patty still gripped me, and her face was free of sand… but the tear tracks, like stained ink, remained.

The spirits running away…

Mrs. Patty Roller…

Pattyroller.

Patroller.

*Slave Patrol.*

Patty’s fingers began to burn like cold iron against my skin as she leaned in close.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Tristan Strong.”

# 12
# HAINT BLUE

***RUN.***

The word boomed inside my skull. Patty Roller's hand encircled my wrist like a handcuff as she chuckled. Her two patrol-boat escorts crowded in even closer as she spoke in a casual tone that still dripped with menace.

"Let's see now. I believe I saw a news report about a riot you started." Patty shook her head and adopted a forlorn expression. "So much violence and mayhem. Upsetting the good, respectable people in such a manner. It is my sworn duty to bring children such as you to a new, well-structured environment. A place where you can be taught appropriate behavior."

"I don't need your lessons," I said, gritting my teeth and trying to break away from the cold bite of her grip.

"You all need to be taught a lesson!" Patty shouted.

I recoiled. For a second there… No, it couldn't be. I couldn't have seen what I thought I did.

Patty took my silence for submission. She nodded, straightened her hair, and cleared her throat. The tear tracks on her face faded slightly as she calmed down.

"That's better. You'll learn faster when you're

docile." *Docile?*

“Now come along. There are more of your kind to gather, not to mention the wretched ghosts traipsing up and down these banks. Like gnats, they are. I’d rather collect children than those spectral nuisances any day.”

As she began to pull me over to one of the gray patrol boats, I thought about what Patty had just revealed.

“So you’re the one taking the missing children…” I said slowly, though my thoughts were running a mile a minute. “For what?”

“Why, education, my dear.” Patty smiled, and I shuddered and looked away. “Children these days are *lacking* good, strict discipline in their learning.” Her other hand shot out and gripped my chin, forcing me to stare at her face and acknowledge what I’d noticed before, what had set my heart pounding as I stood trapped on that sandbar.

Patty Roller’s sharp teeth glistened as she smiled, and her permanent tear tracks flared when I managed to press the spirit bead on my adinkra bracelet between my wrist and upper thigh.

I blinked, and Patty Roller’s eyes smoked at the corners.

She was a haint.

“Now, then,” she said.

*CRAAAAACK*

The patrol boat to my left disintegrated into splinters as the *River Queen* rammed her way forward.

“Tristan!” Ayanna shouted. “Run!”

In the chaos and confusion, Patty’s grip on me loosened for just an instant. I jerked free and took off across the sand.

*Run.*

Run like the spirits I’d seen earlier, driven by the fear of being captured, of being dragged back to an environment and routine and mentality that stripped them of humanity even in death.

Run like the kids in the streets of New Orleans, trying to escape the pitfalls the system had created for them. The same kids Patty Roller was scooping up left and right, apparently in an effort to try to “reeducate” them.

The mere idea was wild, and if I wasn’t running for my life and freedom, I would’ve stopped and laughed. People were always trying to teach us the “proper” things, when the facts we needed to learn weren’t included in any history books.

Like how an education was an education, until it wasn’t.

Like how half of New Orleans had been built on the bloody red stories of slavery.

Like how coffles were for harnessing teams of animals… or slaves.

Like how a prison had been built on the site of a plantation.

Like how the faint outline of a Black man stood at the far end of the sandbar….

Wait, what?

The man, clearly a spirit, wore a faded blue collared shirt tucked into blue pants, and a hat tilted jauntily on his head. He looked to be about my dad's age. As I sprinted his way, he turned and walked toward the edge of the water, where he disappeared.

"What… is… happening?" I gasped out. I risked a look over my shoulder. The mermaid carvings on the starboard side of the *River Queen* had grabbed the second patrol boat and were in the process of battering it to smithereens. But Patty Roller's steamboat had righted itself and now chugged after me with her at the helm. It didn't have as much power as Mami Wata's flagship, but it was still gaining on me, and I was running out of sandbar.

Suddenly the spirit appeared again, this time across the river. He beckoned for me to follow. I reached the end of the sand, glanced back at Patty Roller leaning over the rail of her boat as she hollered at me, and waded into the water. Luckily it wasn't too deep, as the sandbar must have obstructed the water on the opposite side, but still… Could I ever have an adventure where I wouldn't get wet? I needed to start wearing Crocs at all times, just in case.

I reached the bank, and three new spirits appeared. Like the first, they were Black men in the same blue outfit. Two of them looked to be in their twenties, and one was just a little older than me. They smiled at me in welcome.

"You all need to get out of here!" I shouted as I began to sprint upriver. "Go! Before they catch you!"

The spirits disappeared, then reappeared twenty feet in front of me and farther from the river.

"Didn't you hear me?" I called. "They're coming for me and you!"

Patty Roller was catching up. I could understand her shouts now.

"You ungrateful little stain on society, get over here! I will hunt you down, you hear? I will not rest until you receive the proper care and

tutelage that someone like you deserves."

Yeah, I had no doubts about what sort of *care* I'd get from her. Her tone was similar to Cotton's. Did all haints talk with a superiority complex wedged up their butts, or were these two related somehow?

The three spirits in blue stood on the riverbank by a pile of wood. They motioned for me to join them, and I shook my head in despair. Did they not understand the danger?

"You all have to—" I started.

I slowed as I got closer and saw that the wooden debris was actually an old sign. A marker indicating the city limits. Apparently we weren't far from… I kicked aside a wooden spar and read the name written in faded white paint.

"Vicksburg, Mississippi…" I looked at the three spirits, who beamed at me. "Birthplace of the United States Colored Troops."

Ah, so they were soldiers. The spirits turned and walked up the hill beyond the sign, and again they beckoned me to follow. I did, since it got me a bit farther away from Patty Roller, who'd slowed down to try to see where I'd gone. At the top of the hill, we joined the original soldier, the older one who'd appeared on the sandbar. He pointed down into a valley where the outskirts of a city could be seen.

"Vicksburg?" I asked.

He nodded.

"And I should go there…why?"

The soldier gestured to a manmade tributary that forked from the Mississippi and led straight into town. He then pointed at Patty Roller's boat and pretended to shoo it away.

"We'll be safe there?" I asked.

Another nod.

I hesitated. Vicksburg looked far away, a long distance from the *River Queen*, which was slowing down as if beginning to tire. The mermaids had lost their grip on the other patrol boat, and Patty Roller's red-striped vessel was still chugging forward. She'd catch me if I stayed on the main river, which curved sharply until it almost doubled back on itself. But if I followed the spirits and took this detour, I could reunite with my friends later on….

"Okay," I said. "I'm with you. Let's go."

The spirits smiled approvingly. The youngest soldier pumped his arms in a familiar gesture.

*Run.*

# 13

# IF ONE OF US AIN'T FREE...

**THERE ARE A FEW THINGS I SHOULD HAVE BEEN AWARE OF BEFORE** following a group of spirits on a breakneck race to escape capture. Nothing too out of the ordinary, but I figure a PSA here will save future Anansesem (we started a movement, not a moment) the embarrassment of doing what I did.

First, spirits don't tire. They don't suffer from exhaustion, sleep deprivation, nightmares that keep them from resting and recovering, or even the occasional mid-sentence yawn that encourages adults to send them to bed early. Nope. None of that. They do what they have to, no pauses, no interruptions. Kinda inspiring… unless you're the one trying to keep up with them.

"How… much… farther?" I gasped out as we cut across a field and started loping down a wide paved road. They didn't answer, and I grumbled but continued running, trying to keep an eye out for oncoming cars and the gravel they'd kick up.

See, that's the second warning about fleeing with spirits I could've used ahead of time. Those spectral sprinters didn't have to worry about hazards or obstacles the way I did. A huge semi bearing down on us? They didn't care, ran right through it. Me?

“Gaaaaaah!!!” I shouted as I dove off the asphalt and tumbled down the embankment on the side of the road. The truck, hauling the trunks of recently cut trees and showering pieces of bark down on me, roared past. I stood shakily and dusted myself off. I took a step—

*SQUELCH*

My foot sank up to my ankle in thick black mud. The small river gurgled past, laughing at me all the way.

“That’s it!” I shouted. “I’m done! No more running.”

I pulled out my foot, grimaced at the smelly mud that was caking my Chucks, and glared up at the four spirits who had materialized in a semicircle around me. The soldiers weren’t looking at me, however. They stared at the river and a sign on the opposite bank.

“Vicksburg Historical Society Future Site of USS *Cairo* Memorial Plaque,” I read aloud. I looked at the closest soldier, a man about Granddad’s age. He had a graying mustache and scars running along one side of his face. He noticed my gaze and smiled.

“Our story. Freedom,” he said.

“So you *can* talk,” I said. “’Bout time.”

A horn blared downriver. Patty Roller’s boat! It had navigated the smaller river mouth and was now chugging toward us in the distance. I whirled around to address the soldiers. “Okay, we have to keep going. Where to, huh? Where do we run now?”

The older man shook his head and pointed at the river. “Our story. Freedom.”

“There’s nothing there!” I threw up my hands in frustration. “Nothing! We’re going to get caught if we stay here! Now what? What am I supposed to do now?”

As desperation warred with despair inside me, I felt paralyzed by indecision. A haint bent on capturing me and children like me was minutes away from accomplishing her goal, and I was seconds away from giving up.

The older spirit continued pointing. His three companions were wading into the middle of the water, slowly disappearing. I squinted. No… there was something under the water. Something long and wide.

I inhaled sharply.

The spirit smiled again, this time with a trace of pride in his eyes. He pointed at my right wrist, then at himself, then at the river. “Our story,” he said again. “Freedom.”

I nodded. I thought I understood… but could I do it? I'd never tried anything like this with the adinkra bracelet, and after the catastrophe on the barge tow in New Orleans, I hesitated.

But what choice did I have?

The old soldier hefted his belongings on his back, and as he did, I noticed rust stains on his shirt cuffs and the bottoms of his pant legs. From iron shackles. The spirit followed his comrades into the river and disappeared. I was alone… but I had a job to do.

Anansesem. The carrier of stories, the recorder of stories, the reteller of stories. I'd been shirking my duties. And if Patty Roller had her way, if Cotton got what he wanted, the stories I carried and the ones I hadn't recorded yet would be lost forever.

Not today, fam.

*"Let me tell you a story,"* I whispered as I grabbed the Isihlangu spirit bead… and the Gye Nyame adinkra.

Two charms of power at the same time.

My vision went black…

… and when it returned, the story of the soldiers blasted through the water and unspooled in front of me. Fiery words seared my eyes and burned their painful way into my mind.

And I read.

Thunder crashed and lightning shot past my face. Had I been caught in a storm? My ears rang, and I couldn't see more than a foot in front of me.

"John, you okay? We gotta go."

The voice came from nearby, but I couldn't see who spoke. Everything was blurry… and yet, if I focused, everything was as clear as if I were watching a movie. I was still on the riverbank, and there were others around me. This wasn't my usual Anansesem magic. I was *inside* the story!

"John!"

"Right here!" I called. Except my name wasn't John, and it wasn't my voice. It was someone else's, even though it came from my mouth. This was too weird.

A man appeared out of the fog. He beckoned to me, and I recognized him as the oldest soldier, though now he didn't have on his uniform, just some tattered pants and a cotton shirt. The scars on his face were fresh, and there was a desperate anger in his eyes.

“We gotta go, now, while the storm makes it hard for them to track us.”

I—we?—nodded and began to follow him. We knew him. Trusted him. Our father? No, our uncle. He led us through the fog as the storm raged around us.

“Where are we going?” we asked.

“Heard them Union boys are up around Vicksburg,” he answered, never breaking stride. “Folks said they carrying freedom with them. We get to them, join up, and maybe we can get the rest of the family north, too.”

Vicksburg. For an instant my thoughts separated from John’s, and I saw the town as it had looked from the hilltop. The supermarkets, the gas stations, the casinos. Then our thoughts merged again, and Vicksburg appeared as it had in his time. The forts, the siege works, the cannons. Our uncle led us across muddy tracks and fields filled with lines of white tents.

The fog returned, wiping everything away, though I still heard the voice of our uncle guiding us forward.

“Hurry up, son. You in the USCT now, ain’t got no time for slouching.” We looked down. Now we were wearing the uniform I’d seen the spirits in earlier. The USCT. I remembered Terrence talking a mile a minute about one of the museums he’d visited down in New Orleans.

*And Black people fought in the Civil War!* he’d said. *Artillery, infantry… They even served on gunboats along the Mississippi, like the USS* Cairo*. The United States Colored Troops. The USCT.*

That’s right. So, John and his uncle had fought in the Civil War. I wrestled with that idea for a few moments as we ran through the spirit’s memory. What if your choices were either to remain enslaved or to risk trying to escape and avoid capture just to end up fighting on a battlefield where you might die? *Freedom.* That’s what the old soldier, John’s uncle, kept saying to me. It meant having control over your own life, your own education, your own words and actions. Some people died for want of it. Some people died having never obtained it. And some fought a war for it.

“John!”

The shout came out of the fog, and we looked up to see a dock with a weird-looking boat tied to it. Like a steamship that had been covered in armor. It was completely enclosed, save for openings where cannon barrels poked out. John’s uncle stood in front of us, his hat in his hands and resolve in his eyes. His uniform seemed older, more worn and patched up. So did ours.

More time had passed, I realized.

“I said no. This ain’t for you—you get up to Fort Pillow and find your friends, you hear me? If what I heard is true… Well, you just go find them. Leave this to me.”

He turned toward the boat—the word *ironclad* popped into our head— and we moved to follow him aboard.

“No!” he shouted, just as cannons boomed and a flurry of activity erupted in the fog around us. “Go! We’ve got this.”

“I can help you!” we screamed.

John’s uncle disappeared into the ironclad. I could just barely read the lettering on the side before the fog swallowed it up.

USS CAIRO

“Here they come!” someone shouted.

The ironclad chugged away from the dock, steam and smoke billowing out behind it as it moved downriver. Dozens of cannons fired from the ship, aimed at something I couldn’t see.

Suddenly a violent tug pulled me into the fog—I had the sensation of being dragged at a breakneck pace. And then I was in darkness, a sliver of light in front of my eyes as I held something heavy in my arms. I was looking out a window… no, a viewport. The floor tilted beneath my feet. I was on a boat. The ironclad—I was aboard the USS *Cairo*. This time I was in a different person’s story. I saw a young man on the bank—John, the spirit I’d just shared the previous memory with. Now that I could get a good look at his face, my jaw dropped.

“Freedom.” The old spirit spoke from my mouth. “Go get your freedom, boy.”

I had one second to see a determined expression settle on John’s face before he turned and ran. It was just as well, because as soon as he disappeared over the hill, on his way to wherever Fort Pillow was, the USS *Cairo* exploded.

The last thing the man had seen was his nephew.

The last thing I saw before I was kicked out of the man’s memory was a friend of mine, wearing a younger guise than the one he’d worn in Alke.

It was High John the Conqueror.

Too many things whirled around in my head. The soldiers of the USCT fighting for the Union. High John the Conqueror, first enslaved and now a

god.

Cannons fired, and a giant splash echoed through the evening. I blinked, then jerked myself back to reality. The ghost of the USS *Cairo*, in its fully intact form, floated on the water in front of me. Downriver, Patty Roller's ship had stopped to do battle with the *River Queen*, which had managed to catch up to her. Patty Roller's vessel and one of the smaller patrol boats now flanked Mami Wata's riverboat on the left and right. Even worse, tentacles—like the kind that had emerged from Old Angola—had reached out from the patrol boat and were slowly strangling the steamship.

"Orders, young man?"

I looked at the USS *Cairo*, wreathed in purple-and-orange fire, with its cannons of gold. The spirit of John's uncle stared at me expectantly.

"Me?" I asked.

The old man smiled. "You fighting for freedom, right? For your friends? Just like my nephew. I've seen power before, son, and I'll tell you the same thing I told him. It ain't just your freedom you gotta fight for, it's *everyone's* freedom. If one of us ain't free, none of us free."

The battle downriver raged on as the sun crept closer and closer to the horizon. Night was coming. I licked my lips as the power of the gods danced through me. It was one thing to be able to see spirits, another to be able to see the stories that made up the world. But it was something else entirely to be an active participant in those stories. I couldn't describe the experience other than to say it felt like my skin was made of lightning and my words were thunder.

"So," the old soldier said. "Orders?"

I took a deep breath. If someone wasn't free, no one was free. My friends. The children Patty Roller had snatched. The spirits Cotton's prison monster had eaten. I had to free them all. And it started here.

I pointed at the smaller patrol boat with its octopus arms. "Fire!" I shouted.

The USS *Cairo* belched flame and light as its cannons, made of the spinning golden names of the four Black soldiers who served aboard, attacked.

The patrol boat disappeared in a cloud of smoke and ruin.

The *River Queen*, now facing only one opponent, pulled away and steamed forward. Patty Roller's boat, its red stripe glistening in the light,

followed. I could just make out the haint standing at the prow. Her face twisted into a sneer as we locked eyes.

“Fire!” I shouted a second time.

The cannons aboard the USS *Cairo* boomed again, just as the mermaid carvings lining the side of the *River Queen* screamed in unison and sent a mighty surge of water back toward Patty Roller.

The haint shrieked as the combined attack blasted her boat backward, the force carrying her downriver and out of sight.

# 14
# THE GODS MUST BE CRANKY

**“I THINK I FIGURED OUT WHAT COTTON IS DOING WITH HIS GIANT,** ugly fortress of horror,” I said.

We were in the throne room of the *River Queen*. Me, Anansi, Gum Baby, and a weary Mami Wata. The goddess sat on her wooden throne as three tiny mermaid carvings on the headrest plaited her hair. She looked drained beyond measure, even more than she had after Angola.

When Ayanna had picked me up from the banks of the Yazoo River near Vicksburg, she’d told me that Mami Wata had put all her reserve energy into fighting off the patrol boats, and it nearly wasn’t enough. Ayanna was navigating the steamship now, and we currently chugged upriver, back on the Mississippi and moving at a good clip. But maintaining that speed was all Mami Wata could manage at the moment. Patty Roller had taken a serious toll on her. I hoped that John Henry and Nyame would rejoin us soon. They were still off pursuing Cotton, but I was starting to get the impression that we needed all the backup we could get. If it hadn’t been for the USS *Cairo*, and my combining the adinkras and commanding the power of the spirits, the battle would’ve been lost. I still couldn’t believe any of it had really happened.

Now, with her eyes half-closed, Mami Wata listened as I tried to relay everything I'd learned. "Tell me," she said softly as she leaned back in her throne.

Ayanna had draped a blanket over my shoulders, and I pulled it tight as I began to pace around the room. "I don't have all the pieces of the puzzle yet, but we know Cotton chose the haunted plantation of Old Angola for a reason." I swallowed and forged ahead. "He combined the evil power still in that house with the prison of today and created a monster."

"What does that have to do with the spirits?" Anansi asked. There was a challenge in his voice, but I didn't shy away from meeting his eyes as Gum Baby cradled the SBP.

"He's hunting them," I answered.

"Wait, wait, wait." Gum Baby bounced down from the chair she was sitting on, propped the SBP on it, and stomped forward. "Let Gum Baby get this straight. Old Thorny Butt is hunting spirits? Why? What is wrong with people? First old fake-tears lady is capturing children, and now we gotta rescue Gum Baby's ancestors, too?"

Mami Wata pursed her lips. "The two serve the same purpose, I'm sure of it, but as yet I can't guess what Cotton's goal is."

I hesitated to respond. Not because I thought I might be wrong, but because I might be right, and if I was, the answer scared me. It scared me a lot.

"Tristan?" the goddess asked. "What is it?"

I took a deep breath. "When I was out on the river, I grabbed two of the adinkra charms at once, and I *saw* through two different spirits' eyes. I saw their experiences. That's what helped you—the spirits' untold stories."

Silence gathered in the throne room before Anansi sighed. "Is that all?" Mami Wata leaned forward. "Yes, but why would the haint want spirits?"

I started pacing. "Cotton's raiding places where Black people suffered in large groups. Think about it—the French Quarter, where Africans landed and were sold as slaves. The plantation, the prison. And if I'm right, I know where he's going to be next."

The goddess raised an eyebrow.

"Fort Pillow."

Anansi frowned. "Why there?"

“It was the site of one of the biggest massacres of Black soldiers in the entire Civil War. People fighting for their freedom were cut down by Confederate soldiers without remorse.”

“Which means hundreds of spirits…” Mami Wata said. She leaned over and tapped one of the mermaids on her throne. “Ask Ayanna to come down, please.” She reclined again, and it looked like it was taking all her energy to do so. When Ayanna walked in a few seconds later, the goddess’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Can we reach Fort Pillow from the river?”

Ayanna moved toward the map and traced her finger along the route. “Yes. It’s just off the main river, in a place called Tennessee. We’re about to cross the border now, so we’re making good time.” She looked worried, as if the speed we were traveling was too much for Mami Wata to sustain. Just how much of the goddess was in her steamship? I wanted to catch Cotton, but not at the expense of one of our own.

“It looks like that fort is”—Ayanna squinted—“just north of a major city called Memphis. Maybe we can rest there and—”

Anansi perked up, interrupting her. “Memphis? Did you say Memphis?”

Ayanna nodded at him, and the spider god hopped to his (six) feet, becoming more animated as he paced up one side of the phone’s screen, walked upside down along the top, then came down the other side. “Okay. Okay, that’s perfect. I’ve been getting alerts coming in every hour, and they’re all located in Memphis. Junior *has* to be there. If we can get there before Patty Roller or Cotton or anyone else, we can rescue him!”

“And the others,” Ayanna added. “Like Thandiwe, and Chestnutt, and —”

“Yes, them too, I suppose. Now we’ll have to leave right away, and Wata, you’ll have to put more juice in the wheel. There’s no time to waste.” Ayanna looked skeptical. Gum Baby had climbed up the back of Mami Wata’s throne and was giving the mermaids advice about how to braid hair. I stepped forward and held up a hand. “Wait. Look at her, Anansi. She’s barely recovered from the last battle. She needs to rest.” “Rest?! There’s no time—”

“We will find Junior!” I shouted. “But we have to be smart about it. We can let Mami Wata cruise along the river and meet her on the other side of Memphis. If we take a taxi—”

“A taxi?! You want to take a taxi into battle?”

I tried to maintain some sense of calm. “It’s not a battle. Not yet. We need to know more about Cotton’s plans before we—”

“Cotton’s plans?” Anansi scoffed. “His plans are to create chaos.”

“And we have to figure out how he intends to accomplish that. He’s harvesting spirits, but what’s he going to do with them all? Why does he keep going? It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense is how that haint has purchased real estate in your head. You’re making mistakes left and right. Charging into fights you can’t win. Ignoring the very people you’re supposed to protect!”

“So I’ve made mistakes!” I shouted. “I’m

trying!” “Then try *harder*!” he roared.

Everyone in the room stared at the two of us. Anansi glowered at me, his eyes bloodshot and his voice raw. What was with him? Why couldn’t he see that I cared about finding Junior just as much as he did?

“Anansi,” I said in a calmer tone, “we *will* rescue the other Alkeans. But we also have to stop Cotton before he causes more mayhem. We can’t be divided at a time like this.”

“The only thing that’s divided,” the trickster god said quietly, “is your attention. It’s because of your lack of focus that we’re in this mess. You know, at first I thought you were just growing accustomed to the task of leadership. Now I’m beginning to think you never had that quality in you. I should have done this a long time ago.”

His words landed like slaps to my face. “What are you talking about?”

But it was Mami Wata who answered, her eyes closed. “Anansi… has requested that your title of Anansesem be revoked and that his time under your supervision be considered complete.” When she opened her eyes, I could see more than exhaustion in them. I also saw regret, and apology. “I sent word to Nyame, but until he returns, the decision will have to wait. If the sky god rules in Anansi’s favor, then the Story Box will be removed from your possession, and Anansi will be reinvested into his proper form.”

Her words robbed me of everything keeping my legs upright. If it weren’t for Ayanna’s hand, I would’ve fallen when Mami Wata spoke her next sentences.

“You are hereby put on temporary probation and will remain in your room, where you will be grounded until further notice. For the time being, I will take charge of the Story Box.”

# 15
# REAL HEROES TAKE TAXIS

**NO LONGER AN ANANSESEM**.

Even if I was only on probation and could somehow convince Nyame and the other gods that this was all one huge mistake, the very idea of spending any length of time away from the SBP seemed unbearable. Stories had become my life. My purpose! Even now I wanted nothing more than to slip out into the night and find this realm's High John. Or seek out more spirits and ask them to tell me about their accomplishments. How many phenomenal people had history forgotten? I needed to know. The world needed to know! That was the job of an Anansesem. My job. At least it *was*.

No chance of that happening now.

I sat alone in a chair in one of the *River Queen*'s many guest cabins. Stream beds had been carved into the wooden floor and then covered with glass so water could trickle across the room, while the walls displayed flickering scenes of storms raging across different environments, like deserts and mountain rain forests. I even thought I saw Nyanza, the City of Lakes, which had been Mami Wata's home back in Alke. Surprisingly, watching the violent storms calmed me down. I guess I appreciated anything that seemed more chaotic than my life at the moment.

Someone knocked on the door. When I didn't answer, they barged in anyway.

"Wow, Bumbletongue, you're so rude. Gum Baby was coming to console you, but you're just too good for that, huh?" The tiny doll stood in front of me, hands on her hips. She shook her head. "Well? What are you doing just sitting there? Is your butt cold?"

"What do you want me to do?" I muttered.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself and help Gum Baby save the day! Or does she have to do all the work around here?" Gum Baby rolled a tiny ball of sap in her hands and raised it threateningly.

I shook my head in disgust. "Didn't you hear them? I'm on probation."

"Gum Baby don't hear too well—it's all the sap." She pretended to dig in her ear.

"Well, it's true. What am I supposed to do now? Wait and let Cotton take over the world? Let him and his haint crew—and, by the way, we don't know how many other members there are—bring panic and pain to everyone around him?"

Gum Baby had dropped into a crouch and was staring at the miniature rivers in the floor. "Hm? Oh, were you talking to Gum Baby? Sorry, she thought you were doing that one thing you always do. Now, what is it called? Oh yeah, whining. You done whining?"

"Hey, that's not—"

Gum Baby did throw a sap ball at me this time. "No, Tristan Talk Time is done. Gum Baby has the floor." She pointed at the ground. "See, she even wrote her name on the glass—Gum Baby's floor. Now listen up, whiney-heinie. So what if you're on probation. You can't be a hero without a phone? Stop relying on objects to accomplish your objective, my gummy."

I opened my mouth to protest, then paused. Did… Did she actually have a point? Sweet peaches, she did.

"You're right," I said.

Gum Baby cupped her ear. "What's that? Gum Baby told you she's hard of hearing. Give Gum Baby her flowers like you mean it."

I rolled my eyes. "*N*-*E*-ways, I guess I really don't need the SBP."

"Now you're talking. Stop relying on material things. That's the mantra of the gummy. Follow the Gum-true path and stick to it." Gum Baby trotted over to the window and scrambled up to the sill. "Has Gum Baby ever led you astray?"

I sighed, refusing to answer that. “Okay, let me think. I need to wait until we get just outside the city, then sneak off the boat and catch a ride to Memphis. We find Junior and the others, then we go take down Cotton before he can reach Fort Pillow.” I clapped once. “We can do this.”

Gum Baby raised the window, then clapped her hands as well, spraying sap everywhere. “Gum Squaaaaaaaad!”

I wiped my eyes clean and glared at her.

She shrugged. “Not Gum Baby’s fault you don’t wash the sleep out your eyes in the morning. Now let’s go before you chicken out.”

“Not yet. We need to wait until—” Something in the tiny terror’s expression stopped me, and I looked at her suspiciously. “Hold up, where are we?”

“Ayanna convinced Anansi to help us get to Memphis faster. She said the sooner we got here, the sooner we could get an answer from His Grumpiness Nyame. That made ole Web Butt hustle. Should’ve seen him working with the mermaids.”

Sneaky. I nodded. “Okay, first things first, we need to find a way to call a cab,” I said. “Maybe there’s a public—”

Gum Baby grinned, then reached into her sap-pack—I mean *backpack* —and pulled out a purple-and-gold flip phone. “Gum Baby got that covered.”

“Where in the world did you get a phone?” I asked, horrified. Something about Gum Baby having enhanced powers of communication felt like a disruption in the natural order of things. “And I thought you said no material—”

She tossed me the phone before backflipping out the window, shouting as she fell. “Gum Baby stay making moooooooves!”

I stared at the phone, then peered out the window. One of the *River Queen*’s lifeboats rocked on the water beneath me. Ayanna sat in it with her baseball bat in her lap and an oar in each hand as Gum Baby clambered up into the seat opposite her.

“Well?” Ayanna said. “You coming, flyboy?”

I grinned. There’s nothing like friends who have your back.

“Just one thing,” she said, freezing the smile on my face as a sly grin crossed her own. “This rickety rowboat won’t last if you jump down into it. So, um, you’re going to have to get wet.”

The taxi driver took us from the dock all the way to midtown Memphis. He stopped in what looked like a war zone.

"Sorry, folks," he said. "I can't get any closer than this. Something is blocking the road up ahead."

He couldn't see what the trouble was. I looked at the two friends with me in the back seat and could tell they couldn't see it, either.

"That's fine," I said, eager to get my soaking-wet self out of the tiny hatchback. "We'll hop out here. Thanks for the—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, there, buddy," the taxi driver said, turning around in his seat. The old Black man had a bushy mustache that wriggled across his face like a caterpillar. "Y'all might be kids, but that was a grown-folks' fare. Y'all need to get together and come up with some money."

"Oh, right," I said. "Forgot for a minute." I couldn't tell him what had distracted me, because he wouldn't have believed it.

Fortunately, Nana and Granddad had given me some spending money for New Orleans before they grounded me. I started digging in my shorts for my wallet as Ayanna leaned over and whispered, "Tristan, what are you doing? If the road is blocked, have him drive us around it."

Gum Baby nudged my legs from her hiding spot down below the seat, but I ignored her and continued to scrounge in my pockets. Where *was* that wallet? "Trust me," I said to Ayanna. "We want to get out here."

The taxi driver was watching me in the rearview mirror, and I didn't think he'd appreciate it if he heard me say that I just saw a group of spirits fleeing from what looked to be the Memphis Zoo. So, in response to Ayanna, I just pointed at my adinkra bracelet, then out the window.

Gum Baby tapped me again and I glared down at her. "What?" I whisper-shouted.

The sticky menace held up a credit card and my jaw dropped open. How in the world had she…

"Gum Baby keeps it for emergencies, just like her phone." She patted my leg and settled down on my shoe. "Don't worry, Bumbletongue, Gum Baby will teach you financial literacy once this is all over. She won't even charge for it."

The taxi driver looked at me suspiciously as he accepted the slightly sticky card with the name GUM N. B. BABY on the front. But it worked just fine and he handed it back. "Y'all be careful now. It's a mess up ahead.

Also, I heard them talking on the news about missing children. Go straight home, you hear?"

"Yessir," I said. "Just have to go see my uncle real quick. Thank you!"

As the taxi pulled away, Ayanna stared at me like I'd sprouted wings behind my ears. "What uncle?"

I pointed to the sky above the zoo. The park and the streets around it had been cordoned off due to structural damage. And from the cinder blocks I saw strewn about, I knew which giant monster had caused the destruction. I waited, waited some more, and then stabbed my finger upward again.

"That uncle," I said, as a giant bird the color of ink and shadows dove out of the clouds. A man was on its back, and they disappeared into the trees inside the zoo.

High John and his spirit crow, Old Familiar.

# 16
# THE OLD TRICKY STICKY

**THE ZOO WAS A DISASTER**.

"Hoo boy," Gum Baby said. "Somebody got their butt *whooped*."

The entrance, a giant tan structure that sloped down on both ends and had colorful pictures of animals painted all over the surface, was in ruins. A bent metal sign called it the AVENUE OF ANIMALS. It looked like the elephants had escaped and tap-danced up one side the avenue and break-danced down the other. Rubble lay in piles all over the courtyard in front, and something had twisted the metal turnstiles like used paper clips. Flowers and shrubbery had been torn up by their roots and strewn everywhere.

"Who could've done this?" Ayanna whispered.

I didn't answer, but I suspected it wasn't a *who*, but a *what*.

As we walked through the damaged entrance and followed the trail of ruin deeper into the zoo, Gum Baby shook her head and let out a low whistle. "Gum Baby ain't seen destruction like this since…" She paused to think, then nodded. "Probably since the last time Bumbletongue had to save the world."

"Hey!" I said.

Somehow, the little terror had finessed her way into riding on my shoulder ("Clearly, Gum Baby's the best lookout.") and she was snapping

pictures of the damage as we crept past Cat Country, where the lions and tigers—and, bear with me, were those black panthers?—were kept. Gum Baby zoomed in on one of the enclosures, then sighed.

“Gum Baby used to know a giant cat. Never knew if it was a lion or a tiger, but Captain Bigtooth was a dear friend.”

I rolled my eyes. “How could you not know what kind of cat it was? Did it have stripes, a mane, what?”

“Gum Baby don’t question identities, Bumbletongue—that’s rude!”

Ayanna flapped a hand at us as she peered down the path at the next exhibit. “Will you two be quiet? There’s something going on up

ahead.” “What is it?”

“Who wants a piece of Gum Baby?”

Ayanna didn’t answer. Instead, she tiptoed off the path and moved quickly across a patch of grass into the shadow of a large building. I followed, Gum Baby watching our backs from her perch on my shoulder, and we all huddled next to the rear corner of the structure and slowly peeked around.

The back of the building had been destroyed. Glass skylights, partially shattered, dangled over the gaping hole, and a giant sign was wedged in the branches of a tree.

“Tropical Bird House,” I read aloud.

“Shhh,” Ayanna hissed, pointing. Lumps lay in rows on the grass nearby, but I couldn’t tell what they were. Gum Baby jabbed me in the side of the neck (um, ow?) and turned my head back toward the giant hole in the building. Shadowy figures moved around the darkness inside. They whispered to each other, calling out instructions, and we shrank down as two of them walked outside lugging another one of those weird lumps.

“Are those—” Gum Baby whispered.

“Birds?” Ayanna finished. “I hope they’re not dead….”

I didn’t answer, because at that moment, the figures holding the lumps entered a circle of light cast by one of several bent lampposts. The figures were humans—adults—and they wore shapeless gray cloaks and plastic masks. Running diagonally across each mask, in thick splotchy paint, was a wide red line.

“Come on,” the one nearest to us said, “get it into the light. Is this it? Is this the one? It’s pretty big, right? He said it’d be really big.”

“I don’t know…” the second one said. “It’s tough when they’re struggling like this. But… I’ve seen bigger birds. Ostriches, for example. This is… Isn’t this a stork or something?”

“I don’t know, I’m not an aviation expert.”

I bit back the urge to shout at them that *aviation* meant planes, not birds. I’m glad I restrained myself, because their next sentence would’ve punched the words back down my throat and sent them to live in the pit of my stomach.

“Well, that bird has got be in here somewhere—some sort of shadow crow, they said. It came this way, and we checked every other place.”

Shadow crow? Oh, no! They were after Old Familiar! But what was he doing in a zoo in the middle of Memphis? And why were these two bedsheet-wearing examples of cosplay gone wrong trying to find him? I doubted the reason was for anything good, and that meant only one thing.

We had to stop them.

“Uh-oh.”

I turned to see Ayanna and Gum Baby exchange a knowing look, and I sat back on my heels and frowned. “What?”

“We know that expression,” Ayanna said. “You just decided to do something dangerous without thinking of the consequences, for you or the people with you.”

“Well—”

“And,” Gum Baby interrupted, “Captain Disasterix probably hasn’t thought about what happens *if* his plan succeeds. If you can even call it a plan. It only got one step. Step one: ‘Save me, Gum Baby!’ That ain’t a plan, that’s a prayer.”

“Amen,” Ayanna said, and the two grinned at each other.

“Can we please focus on saving Old Familiar?” I said through gritted teeth. “If we find him, we’ll find High John, who can help us stop Cotton.”

“Boy, fix your face,” Gum Baby said, throwing a tiny ball of sap at me. “Gum Baby, as a matter of fact, actually has a plan. Just follow her lead.” “Wait!”

But the little menace was down my side and sprinting forward before anyone could stop her. Ayanna and I held our breath as she skirted the shadows, somersaulted over one or two birds—I think they were flamingos, but with all of them covered with blankets, I couldn’t be sure—and landed *directly* between the two birdnappers.

“Is she tying their shoes together?” Ayanna asked.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. “No, she’s sapping them together. And now she’s leaving something on the ground behind—Sweet peaches, I think she’s setting up a Tricky Sticky.”

Ayanna pointed. “Look, she wants us to come over.”

Sure enough, Gum Baby was beckoning for us to join her, and I shook my head in resignation. “I think I know what happens next. Shall we?” I extended my arm as if the two of us were heading for an evening stroll.

Ayanna smothered a laugh but linked her arm with mine. “Why not?”

Together, we stepped into the light. I started whistling, and Ayanna began twirling one coil of hair that had escaped her head wrap. If it weren’t for the chaos and destruction around us, it would have been really nice.

“Oi!” One of the masked figures, a man by the sound of it, ruined the mood. He turned and pointed. “What are you two doing—”

“Harold, watch out!” The other adult, a woman, grabbed him by the arm. “What do you want?” she called to us. “You’re not allowed to be in here.”

I exchanged a look with Ayanna, then turned back to them. “But… you’re not, either.”

“Did you break in? Harold, call the police.”

I stared at what they were carrying—a bird bound in rope and blankets —then surveyed the destruction all around us, and finally took in their outfits. “So, let me get this straight…” I said slowly. “You’re going to call the police… on *us*?”

Gum Baby had snuck away and was dancing impatiently in the shadows behind the dynamic duo, but I wanted to understand what gave the two masked adults the idea that they wouldn’t get in trouble, too.

Then Harold spoke. “Heyyy… I recognize this guy. It’s that boy who started the riots down South somewhere. Remember, Darla? On the news? The one we wrote to the newspaper about?”

The lady—Darla—thought for a second. “The sit-ins?”

“No, the other one.”

“The bus boycott?”

“Mmm, I don’t think that’s it.”

“The kneeling?”

I interrupted. “You know, none of those were riots. Not sure you realized that.”

They both glared at me. “Of course they were!” Harold snapped.

Darla’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my gosh, I *do* recognize him. His face was all over the news. Harold, quick, call nine-one-one!”

The man’s phone was out so fast I thought he had magic powers as well. He glanced at the birds, then at the destroyed aviary, and I knew what he was thinking as soon as a wicked gleam entered his eye.

He was going to try to pin this destruction on *me*!

I lunged forward. “Wait, don’t—”

Harold took a step back, and just then the Tricky Sticky engaged. The man tripped as his feet became tangled with his partner’s, and the two of them landed on the ground just as the Frisbee-size sap trap exploded in a sheet of sticky stuff that enveloped everything within a square yard. I was actually impressed at the control. Neither Ayanna nor I got hit, and neither did any of the birds. But the two weird adults in masks wriggled around on the ground, unable to speak as their mouths were covered in sap.

Gum Baby dusted off her hands. “Gum Baby might as well stay here with the monkeys, because she’s a natural guerilla.”

While Ayanna and Denmark Messy discussed what should be done with our captives, I took a cautious step toward the hole in the aviary’s rear wall. Could Old Familiar really be in there? Where was High John?

Whatever the case, I wouldn’t get my answers out here. I took another step inside, then another, easing my way into the darkness. I couldn’t see a thing. Now, I’m not a scaredy-cat, as evidenced by my previous adventures and the certificate I printed off of a phobia website (seriously, you can find a certification for anything these days). But something about the gloom in the aviary chilled me to the core. Maybe it was the absolute silence that greeted me. No chirps, tweets, or hoots. Maybe it was the thought that whatever had smashed a hole in this building was still nearby. Could animals… like gorillas… have escaped from other enclosures? All of a sudden I couldn’t rid myself of the image of a giant silverback rushing at me, and my chest grew tight. That was it—I had to get out. I turned to rejoin Ayanna and Gum Baby… and spotted Harold and Darla wriggling free.

“Hey!” I shouted.

But Harold had gotten an arm unstuck and was jabbing at his cell phone. “Hello? Hello? Earl, it’s Harold again. Yes, I know this is the fifth time tonight, but I’m for real this time. We’ve got us a real live criminal!”

I was just cupping my hands around my mouth to tell the others to run when a noise sounded to my left.

I froze. “Hello?”

Rustling. Creaking. But no response.

“Old Familiar?” I turned and squinted into the darkness. “Is that you?” I inched back inside. There *was* something in there, hiding in the rear. I had just made out a silhouette when it exploded into motion.

*CAW!*

A beak the size of a folding chair rushed toward my chest, ready to skewer me.

Old Familiar burst into the night, and without thinking (yeah, yeah, go ahead and say it, *Tristan never thinks before he acts*, har-har-har) I grabbed the giant crow’s hackles, the feathers around his neck. Within seconds I was airborne, hanging on to the bird for dear life. Someone screamed so loud my ears popped, and it wasn’t until I stopped to inhale that I realized it was me. Old Familiar shot up into the night, but it wasn’t a smooth journey. The crow herked and jerked left and right, flying at weird angles like he was zigzagging while doing a loop de loop, barely avoiding a stand of trees with an animal-themed playground beneath it.

“Old Familiar!” I shouted. “Hey, it’s me! Tristan.”

The crow cawed and tried to climb higher, then squawked and plummeted a dozen feet before regaining altitude. My heart, meanwhile, was probably still falling. Did I ever mention that I have a slight problem with heights? No? Hmm. Well, maybe you weren’t paying attention, just like Old Familiar wasn’t paying attention to my pleading shouts for him to slow down.

“Take it easy!” I said, finally managing to climb on top of his back. “Don’t you recognize me?”

The bird responded by diving again, flapping awkwardly as he tried to dislodge me.

Or was he?

Every so often, Old Familiar would turn his head, peer at me with his giant black eye, let out a harsh caw, then attempt to flap. At first, I thought his actions were meaningless. After a while, though, I paid attention to them. And I noticed his right wing. It was crooked, and every time the crow tried to straighten it to gain some stability, the wing gave out on him and we fell through the air again.

Old Familiar croaked and looked back at me once more.

"Do you need my help?"

*Caw!*

"Okay, tell me what to do."

(Look, I know this situation sounds unbelievable, what with me taking directions from a giant crow that *National Geographic* would throw a fit about, and you're well within your rights to look at me with a healthy dose of skepticism, but if you're going to get off the bandwagon, you gotta do it now, because this story only gets wilder.)

Old Familiar managed to get himself lined up, and then he looked back at me again.

I nodded. "Ready when you are!" I shouted.

That's when I noticed our destination. We were heading directly for the partially destroyed aviary, and Old Familiar showed no signs of stopping. Instead, the crow gathered speed.

"Um," I said.

We flew over the trail of destruction at the zoo entrance, over the huddled, sticky forms of Harold and Darla, and over Ayanna and Gum Baby. The latter two were jumping up and down, waving their arms in warning as if I couldn't tell the bird and I were on a collision course with a concussion.

"What are you doing?" I shouted. "Pull up—we're going to crash!"

Old Familiar continued to guide his rapid descent (a kind way of saying *clumsy fall*) toward the gaping hole in the building. I gripped a handful of feathers and tried to guess how many bones I'd break if I jumped off when we were low enough to the ground. Probably at *least* ten. Maybe even twenty. But I'd survive…right?

A single cry interrupted my plans. *CAW!*

I gritted my teeth and hauled on the bird's good wing in an attempt to slow it down. For a brief, terrifying moment, nothing happened. Then every feather on Old Familiar's back rustled at the same time… against the wind. Shining and black, they stood on end like arm hairs, and I felt a tingling moving up my hands as I continued to hold on. This was power! Magic!

The aviary loomed ahead. Ayanna and Gum Baby shouted warnings, but it was too late. Old Familiar let out a harsh cry as we plunged through broken brick wall and into the dark. Air howled past my face as rubble crashed down behind us. I squeezed my eyes shut, convinced we were

going to ram into a bird enclosure at top speed and it would be *Bye-bye, Tristan Strong, you had a good run*.

But we kept flying.

And flying.

I opened one eye. That couldn't be right. The aviary wasn't that long— how were we still flying? Then I opened both eyes, because I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The zoo collapsed underneath us as we passed over it. No. It *unbuilt* itself. Brick separated from brick, nails popped out of pieces of lumber that floated and stacked themselves into piles. We flew on. The fences around the animal enclosures coiled their wires and removed their posts. The food court dissolved into heaps of plaster, the water drained from the fountains, and cement exploded into powder that sorted itself into bags.

We were outside of time. The last time this had happened, High John was showing me the destruction of the Thicket in MidPass. But why was his spirit crow doing it on his own now?

Old Familiar cawed and looked at me. I pulled the wing again, trying to steer him back to Ayanna, Gum Baby, and the present. But we left the zoo —or the lot that would become the zoo—and entered the city proper. Neighborhoods disappeared before my eyes. Houses, apartment buildings, commercial businesses—everywhere I looked, the city was undoing itself. We circled above it like the complete opposite of a vulture as we watched Memphis return to its roots. The world grayed as if a filter had been dropped over it, and I blinked several times until I confirmed my eyes weren't the problem.

Finally, after ten minutes, Old Familiar descended to the ground, awkwardly but at least upright. I was safe. But where were we? We'd landed in a cluster of houses, but I'd never seen any like these before. They were small, constructed of wood and nothing else. Seven or eight had been placed in a circle with a communal garden in the middle.

Originally painted white, the houses were now scorched black.

"Where are we?" I whispered to Old Familiar.

He cawed and ruffled his feathers but otherwise didn't move. I slid off his back, keeping one hand on him just in case I had to make a quick getaway. "Hellooo?" I called out. "Anybody here?"

No one answered.

I whispered to Old Familiar. “I don’t know why you brought me here, wherever and whenever we are, but I hope you know your way back.”

*Caw!*

“Yeah, well, whoever lived here is long gone. Hopefully they got out okay. This is a ghost tow—”

I broke off just as a young man in a soldier’s uniform walked up the hill, saw the burned-out shell of a neighborhood, and froze.

I froze, too.

Not because he could see me. No, it was because I recognized him. It was John, the boy who had escaped slavery and joined the USCT. The ghost who had looked like High John.

John started running, passing right by me and Old Familiar as he sprinted to the torched homes. A painful wail tore its way out of his throat as John dropped to his knees and pounded the ground. Tears streamed down his face. I looked away and swallowed the sudden lump in my throat.

“Old Familiar, that you?”

It was a different voice, and it made me turn around so fast I got whiplash. I knew that voice. Had argued with that voice. Suddenly, Old Familiar’s actions made sense. The giant bird had been told to bring me to… wherever we were. And the man—no, the god—who had sent him appeared in the broken window of one of the burned-out homes.

“Tristan Strong,” High John the Conqueror said weakly. He coughed. “Might be I’m in need of your help.” And with that, the god collapsed.

# 17
# GODS IN GRAYSCALE

***GODS CAN'T DIE. GODS CAN'T DIE.***

The thought repeated itself over and over as I leaped onto the burned shack's sagging porch. The door shattered when I shoved it open. Dust and the smell of smoke filled the air, and I choked as it filled my lungs.

*Gods can't die. Gods can't die.*

But I was wrong, wasn't I? Stories defined the gods and gave them their power, and if their stories were erased, the people they served forgot about them and they faded away. John Henry, one of the strongest gods I knew, had nearly died after Bear attacked him with his own hammer. The big man eventually pulled through—barely—and as I stumbled through the hollowed ruin of a home, I desperately prayed High John would do the same.

"High John?" I shouted.

"Here," he said from his position in the corner of the house. He wore a long cloak that was ripped and gashed in several spots, black pants, a cream shirt, and his traditional pouch around his neck. He sat in a pile of debris, one hand clutching his chest. I approached slowly, confused and cautious and fearing the worst.

“What happened?” I asked, crouching by his side. “Who did this to you?”

High John let out a pain-filled chuckle. “Your haint friend. Caught me and Old Familiar by surprise. Barely escaped with my life. I’m a bit winded, but I’ll be fine. Just had to hightail it out of there before things got any worse and I lost my opportunity to talk to you.”

“Me?”

High John nodded, then winced. I reached for his cloak to see if I could help and he slapped my hands away. “Leave it, Tristan. There’s no time. Help me up.”

This feeling of me arriving too late to save a hurt friend was all too familiar. I lent him my shoulder, and High John levered himself to his feet and beckoned me to follow. “Come on, I need to show you something.”

“I saw you,” I said as we hobbled to the door. “Outside. Younger and less flashy, and apparently dead, but it was definitely you. And that wasn’t the first time I saw you, either. How is it you’re a ghost but you’re also here?”

High John tried to smile but it came out more like a grimace. “You saw him, huh? Boy been doggin’ my steps ever since I set foot in this world. Sometimes it felt like I was chasin’ *him*.”

“But how can he be here if… you know, you’re here?”

“You mean if I’m alive?” High John asked drily. “Well, I reckon big John Henry told you ’bout it once. How the dreams and stories of this world helped power Alke and everyone in it.”

I nodded. When I first arrived in Alke, John Henry had explained the connection between that world and my own. In Alke, the power of stories was what the iron monsters, Cotton, the Maafa, and even Anansi desired above all. The ability to control the narrative and shape how the future of the world would look. In the wrong hands, the power was dangerous.

“Well, let me ask you this,” High John said as we exited the shack and moved across the porch. “You ever hear of somethin’ called the John tales?” I shook my head. “No, but don’t you think we should get you some help, or maybe—”

High John cut me off with an impatient chop of his hand. “You gotta listen, Tristan. I’m tellin’ you, there ain’t much time. I’ve done a lot of research into this.”

“Why?” I bit my lip after the question slipped out, but High John didn’t seem upset.

“Because I wanted to understand how the stories in this world gave me my strength. Like the ones your Nana passed to you and others. People died for them. So when you brought us all over here and I found myself standin’ in the middle of a store as big as one of Nyame’s palaces, and it was stuffed wall to wall with books and maps and all the stories a god could dream of, I figured maybe, if I learned about my stories over here, I’d get even stronger.” He fell silent, thinking.

“Did you?” I asked. “Did you grow stronger?”

High John sighed. “Tristan, you have no idea. I found old John tales and young John tales. John the trickster and John the tricked. Free John and Slave John. So many stories. I traveled across this country, me and Old Familiar, lookin’ for more. You don’t understand, boy—every time I read one of my stories, I could feel the power in them. So I took them. Reclaimed them.”

We walked to the hard-packed space between the other homes in the destroyed neighborhood. A scrawny sapling—oak, or maple—grew out of the dirt. Old Familiar watched us, his one broken wing dangling awkwardly from his body.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You read the stories and grew powerful?”

High John shook his head impatiently. “No, I *consumed* them. Took them from the world. I thought I was being smart—no one can destroy your stories if they’re inside you.”

He stared at the burned homes around us, seeing them while not really seeing them. “But libraries and books aren’t the only place to find stories. No, sir. And you should know that—remember the first time we met?”

I nodded. Inside the great mountain fortress of Isihlangu, I’d argued with High John over possession of the Story Box. It’s where I met Thandiwe and the elders who helped govern the Ridgefolk. And those elders happened to be spirits.

“Wait…” I said, my mind racing. “Spirits are a story source, too….”

High John grinned. “Now he’s catchin’ on. Think about it. All the spirits you’ve run into had stories they wanted to tell. Tasks incomplete. Injustices…”

He trailed off. I waited for several seconds as he closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked off to the right. “Thandiwe! Remind me to tell

Tristan about the children. It's… it's the children." "High John?" I said, gently shaking him.

The god blinked, then his eyes focused and he frowned. "Losin' myself…" he muttered. "Where'd I fade out?"

"Are you—"

"I'm fine!" he snapped. "No time for that. Where'd I leave off?"

"You were talking about spirits and their stories," I said. "But you just mentioned Thandiwe, and… something about children? Do you know where she is?"

He flapped a hand at me. "Later. You have to understand what I'm tellin' you. The haint knows that a spirit's story is incredibly powerful. All they need is someone to talk to."

I bit my lip. High John's mind seemed to be at war with itself. Still, he had a point. Eddie had been a spirit when he'd warned me about Anansi's tricks. Bear's two cubs had been spirits trying to tell me that their father was the Shamble Man. Spirit stories could reveal truth.

"Now, I ain't got the talents and powers you do," High John said, "but I did have something else: a spirit crow. With Old Familiar's help, I started hearing the John tales from spirits scattered across the land. That's when I ran into him."

He pointed at the John spirit still crying on his knees in front of the burned homes. "He ain't the oldest John tale, or even the most popular. But Old Familiar found him as we were searchin' for more spirits and their stories. Birdbrain actually mistook him for me." High John reclined his head and took a deep breath. Then another. It wasn't until I shifted positions to try to support him better that he looked up. When he saw me, his eyes lit up.

"Tristan! Old Familiar finally found you. Come on, boy, we need to talk."

I stopped. "But… we've been talking."

High John frowned at me. "We have?"

I nodded and watched as he peered around in confusion, then softly hit his thigh with his left fist, his right still clutching his chest. "Losin' my hold," he muttered.

Once, when I was eight, my parents took me with them to visit a friend of the family, an older woman who used to be a professor at the university where Mom worked. She seemed nice, the old professor, but she kept

repeating herself, restarting conversations they'd already had, and telling Mom where to drop off assignments. Each time she did it, I could see the pain it caused my mother. Later, on the car ride home, Mom and Dad had explained to me what Alzheimer's disease is, and how it affects the brains of some adults as they get older. The thought of losing my memories had haunted me for weeks, and I'd obsessively filled notebooks with every experience I'd ever had and then stashed them in secure places around the house. That habit had prompted Mom to start buying me journals, and it was one of the reasons Eddie's mom gave me his journal with our English project in it after he died.

High John sighed and looked off into the distance. "Where was I?" he whispered.

I pointed at the John spirit. High John nodded. "He's a part of me. His story is one of the ones that gave me power in Alke. And heaven knows, I ain't got much of that left…. But you have to see. You have to see what that haint Cotton is doing. He's eatin' history, Tristan." High John continued to limp over to Old Familiar. He stroked the crow's feathers, then gestured for me to join him on the bird's back. "Come, let me show you."

"Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Here, grab hold," he said, ignoring my question. High John placed my hand over Old Familiar's good wing, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then another. After several seconds, he opened his eyes and shook his head. "Too weak," he muttered. "You're gonna have to do it."

I gawked. "Excuse me?"

"You're gonna have to step outside of time again, Tristan."

I started to back away, but he kept hold of my wrist. "Look, I can barely step outside of my apartment without causing some catastrophe," I said. "One time I tripped and crashed through the door of the apartment across the hall. Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to explain to your parents that the neighbors called the police because you're clumsy? No, I don't think so." I was babbling, and High John wore a smirk.

"You ain't got a choice." He placed my hand over my heart, made sure I had a good fistful of my own hoodie, and then put his own uninjured hand on my shoulder. "How you gonna get back home?"

He was right. If High John couldn't send us back out of this grayscale version of Memphis, it would be up to me. I'd only arrived here because Old Familiar knew where to go. Now I had to lead us back. Great. One

more responsibility on my shoulders. Pretty soon I'd need a checklist. Was this how grown-ups felt? No wonder they stomped around with frowny faces all the time.

"You don't have the practice of it," High John continued, "so Old Familiar's gonna be your guide. Just make sure you have a firm hold on him, focus on the place you tryin' to see, and the old featherbag will do the rest."

I hesitated. "What about you?"

"Oh, I'm not goin' with you, boy. I'm gonna sit here for a

spell." "You're not—"

"No, and before you start complainin', I was high-steppin' outside of time when I was your age."

"Great," I muttered. "And I bet you had to walk ten miles through the snow, uphill both ways, when you did it."

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing, nothing." I sighed. "Fine. Where—or when, I don't know— am I going?"

High John's face grew dark. "You'll know it when you see it."

I threw up my hands in disgust.

Seven pristine homes, white paint, blue trim, a communal garden in the center of them all. I was right back where I'd started. Did this whole stepping-outside-of-time thing need a boost? New batteries? Did I have to unplug Old Familiar and plug him back in? What was going on?

"High John," I said, turning around, "I don't think it—"

The Alkean god wasn't there. It was just me and Old Familiar on the hilltop overlooking town. And, as I examined my surroundings, I realized that while I was right back *where* I'd started, I wasn't back *when* I started. There was no fire damage, no smoke-filled air. The sapling was no more than a sprout. This was before the catastrophe had struck the neighborhood.

But where was everybody?

*Caw!*

I turned around just as Old Familiar flapped awkwardly into the air. "Hey!" I shouted, but the shadow crow was already flying to a stand of trees in the distance. I contemplated going after him—that bird was my ticket out of here—but decided against it. I'd stepped outside of time to this spot for a reason. The house where I'd found High John was the closest to

me. He'd wanted me to learn something from this trip, so maybe I had to start in there.

One day I would write a tell-all memoir about gods and their lack of clear directions. Just once I'd love for someone to hand me a to-do list for heroes. *Complete items one through five and you too can save the day.* Good grief.

The wooden stairs were solid and painted blue. The door was still intact, and the brass handle gleamed in the sun. I knocked, waited, then rolled my eyes at my mistake and stepped right through the wood. Being a temporary ghost has its advantages.

The burned single-room shack I remembered was now a cozy home divided into rooms with hanging sheets. I wasn't really sure what I was supposed to be looking for, and I didn't want to invade anyone's privacy, so I kept mostly to the doorway and peeked around. An old woodstove blazed merrily, two wooden chairs on either side. A bed had been shoved into one corner, and in the other was a long wooden table holding carvings in different stages of completion. Pictures had been hung on the wall, and something grabbed my eye, so I stepped closer to examine them.

In the first, an older Black man and woman stood proudly with their hands around a young boy who held a wooden carving of a deer. It was pretty good, actually, and the kid beamed with pleasure as he held up his creation. I smiled. It reminded me of Terrence with his pizza spatula. My smile faded.

I moved to the next picture, exhaling and trying to get the image of fire out of my head, and paused. I knew the person in this picture. The young man wore a crisp blue army uniform and a military-issued hat, and he stood beneath the sign that read USCHA OF MEMPHIS. It was John, the spirit. This was his home? No, his parents' home. No wonder his spirit had been so upset earlier at seeing it burned down.

I moved away and sighed. I still didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for. After giving the home one more quick glance, I shrugged and —

Wait, was that a scream?

The sound had been so faint, I might've imagined it. Still, I'd been here too long. It was time to find Old Familiar and get back to the real world.

I— There it was again! Definitely a scream. Someone was in trouble! I placed the carving back on the table and took a step toward the door—

*CRASH!*

—only to dive backward and land heavily on my back when someone kicked open the door and threw a burning bottle and rag inside. Flames exploded out of broken glass and spread everywhere. More shouts and screams.

“Get the next one!”

“Don’t leave any standing.”

“Get ’em out of here!”

It took me a second to realize that the shouts weren’t aimed at me, and that the glass and flames—as dangerous as they looked—couldn’t hurt me. *You’re a ghost in this time, remember?* I told myself. Still, I cautiously stepped out the door, wary of more flaming bottles aimed in my general direction. Spirit or not, I didn’t want to test my luck.

It was chaos.

A nightmare.

Flames shot fifteen feet into the air. Every house in the small neighborhood was on fire. I couldn’t see anyone, but the screams… I knew the screams would haunt me for the rest of my life. So many. Old, young, I heard them all.

I turned to run down the hill. I don’t know what I was planning to do. I couldn’t speak to anyone in this world. But I couldn’t stand still, either. People were hurting.

It didn’t matter.

Below me, the rest of the town burned. There was no escape for any of the occupants. Even though I knew that this had already happened a long time ago, a tear rolled down my cheek as the screams kept coming, and that laughter, that vicious and cruel laughter floated over everything.

That’s when I understood what High John had wanted me to witness. It hurt that I’d had to watch someone’s home and community burn down to learn it.

A rush of air blew past me, and I looked back to see Old Familiar swooping in through the flames. The shadow crow cawed at me, then cocked his head as if asking was I ready. I nodded, wiped unspilled tears from the corners of my eyes, and reached out to touch his feathers. I closed my eyes tight and tried to shut out the flames. I stepped forward….

When I reentered the gray world of the spirits, High John's eyes were closed and he lay slumped against the ground.

"High John!" I shouted. My stomach flipped and my breath grew short. I feared the worst.

The god stirred. "Hng. Who's yellin' like they ain't got no sense? Tristan? Boy, you got to turn that volume off ten. I'm liable to have ringin' ears for the rest of my life now."

I squatted down next to him. "I know. I know why you sent me there."

The humor faded from High John's eyes. He looked away, over to where the remains of the house—the John spirit's house—stood. He sighed and, after a few moments, spoke in a pain-filled whisper. "Memphis Race Riots of 1866. Nearly all of South Memphis was destroyed, boy. Black-owned homes, businesses, restaurants. People were killed. Abused. Beaten. And yet no one was ever brought to justice. That's what I learned from that spirit. No one was ever brought to justice."

I gulped. "And the spirits are doomed to relive that over and over? Looking for loved ones who never answer, or trying to put out flames that'll never die?"

High John nodded.

I stood and started pacing, trying to connect the dots. Spirits as sources of stories. Cotton. The auction houses of New Orleans. Old Angola, the horrific plantation in Louisiana. The slave barges of the Mississippi. And now the riots of Memphis. "That's why Cotton is feeding spirits to that Old Angola monster. He's trying to harness the power of their stories by consuming them."

"I've seen what happens to the spirits," High John whispered, "when the haint is done feedin' them to that walking fortress. They're torn apart, Tristan. Like smoke driftin' away on a breeze. And the Breakers…" He trailed off, his eyes closing.

I leaned over him and tried to shake him gently. "High John?"

He looked at me, then blinked. "Tristan, you made it! Old Familiar got you here in one piece, huh?"

No. No, no, no. "High John," I said desperately. "You said something about Breakers. What are Breakers, and what do they have to do with Cotton? We don't have much time!"

But his eyes were fluttering shut again. I grabbed his arm, and he managed to look at me. Frustration clouded his face and he gripped my

hand. “Listen, boy, I’m fadin’ here. Fadin’ fast. You gotta find Thandiwe. Hear me? She knows what to do.”

“But—”

“No, just listen. Ask…” He paused to take a deep breath. “Ask Old Familiar to help you. Ask him! He’s a smart old bird, he’ll get you where you need to go. I just need… I just need to rest.” And with that last set of instructions, High John the Conqueror closed his eyes and let his head droop against the grass.

Behind him, the spirit with his face cried.

# 18
# SPIRIT UTILITY VEHICLE

***GODS CAN'T DIE.***

Gods sure are heavy, though.

The streets were empty as I trudged down the hill to the tree where Old Familiar waited. Dim light from the not-quite-risen morning sun filtered through the spaces between buildings and under highway overpasses. The sapling I'd seen in the spirit memory was now a green giant in the middle of the city. Its branches stretched all the way across the street, and its roots had buckled several squares of sidewalk. I'd seen that back in Chicago, but now I actually stared at the phenomenon as I carried High John down toward the tree. Tendrils of roots peeked through cracks in the concrete. Imagine that. Surviving a devastating riot, and decades upon decades of the city changing and hardening around you, and still having the strength to break through the obstacles keeping you from growing.

*Gods can't die.*

I hefted High John, checked to see if he was still breathing, and continued. If I could just get him to Old Familiar, maybe the bird could help. The shadow crow had carried Ayanna after she was injured by brand flies, transporting her to the Mmoatia of Alke, who had performed their healing magic. Had any of the whistling fairies made it over to this world? I

wondered. Anansi would know. I struggled to keep High John balanced in a firefighter's carry while I reached for the SBP, only for my hand to fall back to my side.

Right. The phone had been confiscated.

The burning in my chest started up again. The anger… it, it, it… it just boiled inside of me with nowhere to go. I heard the start of a drumbeat. I tried to take a deep breath, then a second. I needed to calm down, or else….

A whisper of air brushed past me. "Stop following me," I said.

After a few seconds I stopped and turned around. The young man's spirit—I'd started calling him Spirit John in my head—walked a few paces behind me, determination on his face. I couldn't look at him. He reminded me too much of the god in my arms, and how I couldn't control the adinkra powers anymore—they just came and went as they pleased. "Just stop following me," I muttered again.

The spirit didn't listen.

I looked down. Was High John moving? I thought he was. I tried to quicken my steps and finally reached the bottom of the hill. Just a few more feet, and then Old Familiar would know what to do.

*Gods can't die*.

I knew a lot of the John tales. I could find some. Stories were power, and High John just needed a bit more. The adinkra weren't enough. We could use Gum Baby's phone to call Anansi and Mami Wata, and they'd help. Or I could go to the hospital. They had to have something that could bring a god back, right? Tylenol, maybe?

*Gods can't die*.

Old Familiar stared at me with his head cocked as I approached. His beak, longer than my arm, gently touched High John's chest, and the shadow crow ruffled his feathers in distress. He hopped away, then threw his head back to let out the loudest caw I'd ever heard him make. It rang through the morning quiet, echoing off buildings that silently bore witness.

I laid High John gently at the base of the tree trunk and tried to prop him up like he was taking a nap against it. He looked peaceful, and I swallowed.

"High John!" I called out, shaking him. "High John! We're here. Come on, you can't be— High John!" The god stirred, and a sob of relief tore out of my chest. "OH… oh, you're still alive. Man, I… Look, we're here. Old Familiar is right here. Now you two can go get you some help. I—"

High John turned his head so that his eyes met mine. His sad smile cut off my words. “Tristan,” he whispered. “Take this.”

His right hand fell away from his chest, the fingers uncurling to reveal the root bag.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. Teardrops fell onto my hand as I pushed the bag away. “No.”

“Take it. Old Familiar needs you. He’s lost here. This ole bag got some power left in it still. You wear it, and I promise I’ll be with you. Now take it. Take it!”

He started to try to get up and I finally took the bag, if only to get him to rest. High John nodded, then sighed and sank back against the tree. He glanced over at Spirit John, who was standing with his hands shoved into his uniform pants pockets, and the two exchanged a nod. Something was communicated there, something I couldn’t decipher, but the spirit turned and began walking up the street.

“All right, Tristan, I need you to do me a favor.” High John had his eyes closed and his face twisted in pain. “Go ahead with Old Familiar. Find Thandiwe… the kids. Go on now. I’m just gonna close my eyes for… a second.”

I knew an adult’s dismissal of a kid when I heard one. They did it all the time when they wanted to talk among themselves about something they thought we weren’t ready to hear. I looked at Old Familiar. The crow flapped his wings, even the injured one, and hopped between us.

“Is he… ?” I couldn’t bring myself to ask the question. It clumped up in my throat, and I swallowed several times and then changed what I’d been about to say. “I mean, will he be okay?”

The crow stared at me.

“Right,” I muttered. “I’m going.”

I followed after Spirit John, who’d stopped at the corner across the street. Cars were beginning to rattle along the overpass as Memphis started a new day. I glared at the highway. Didn’t they know a god was dying here? How could… How could the world just go on?

I thought about Eddie then. Even now, several months after the accident, I still felt the pain of the loss. Grief never went away, but we were expected to keep going, to get over it. But you didn’t get *over* grief. You put it inside your heart with all the other baggage you’d collected while existing, and you tried to get *along* with it. But who would grieve High

John in this world? How, if his story and his friends were scattered and fading?

Some Anansesem I'd turned out to be. I guess Anansi and Mami Wata had been right to put me on probation.

Spirit John watched me as I approached, and when I stopped in front of him, my words just started tumbling out. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do next. Where am I supposed to go? Cotton is out there, other haints are out there, and now the missing children are a part of this, too? I can't do this. I just can't. I failed, didn't I? The akofena, Anansi, being a hero. You all chose the wrong boy. I'm sorry."

A loud clap of thunder shook the sky. I looked up, confused. It was a clear day, with not a thundercloud in sight. I turned to check on High John and Old Familiar back at the tree, but an SUV driving down the street blocked my view of them. When the car passed, I gasped. The god and his bird were gone! And the tree…

The giant walnut tree had grown several dozen feet. The ground beneath it where High John had lain was now covered in calla lilies, flowers with petals so dark they looked like shadows. And if you turned your head just right, at a certain angle, you could almost see the outline of a god napping beneath their leaves. A shrine to a folk hero in the middle of the city.

I don't know how long I stood there crying.

Each sob brought a different memory. High John appearing in the middle of Isihlangu. High John pulling me outside of time, us soaring on Old Familiar's back. His magic ax chopping up the hullbeast that had threatened the mountain fortress. His root pouch helping a poisoned Ayanna until the Mmoatia could heal her. His beef with Nyame. His love of Alke.

High John was Eddie's favorite hero. I hoped the two of them were together now, swapping stories.

The SUV pulled to a stop in front of me. All black, from the paint to the tinted windows to the rims on the tires. It moved silently, like one of those electric vehicles Nana coveted. At first I thought it was an unmarked police car, but then I spotted the hood ornament.

A crow with its wings outstretched.

"No way," I said, wiping away the tears.

The passenger door in front of me lifted up from the bottom and away, like the wing of a bird, and the silver-and-black interior gleamed. A silver *O* and *F* had been stitched into the back of the driver's headrest.

“Old… Familiar?” I asked slowly.

The headlights flashed and the horn honked. It sounded suspiciously like the harsh call of a crow. Spirit John slipped past me and got inside, then looked at me expectantly. I hesitated, then climbed in after him. The front dash had a giant screen bigger than most TVs, and on it was a map with a route displayed between a crow icon and two smaller icons.

“Are those Ayanna and Gum Baby?” I asked. “Okay. Let’s go pick them up. And then—”

Another icon appeared. Another face, all the way on the opposite side of Memphis. I nodded, then inhaled. Thandiwe. High John had wanted to me to find her. Said she needed help. That was step one, then. After that, Cotton and the other haints would follow. “Yes. Let’s go.”

As the SUV pulled off (Old Familiar apparently had a self-driving license), I looked out the rear windshield, staring at the tree and the flowers until we turned the corner. Then I squeezed the root bag I still clutched in my hand and slipped it around my neck.

Gods can’t die… as long as you remember them.

I don’t recall when Ayanna got into the SUV. I don’t remember Gum Baby curling up next to me, or Old Familiar driving us through Memphis morning-rush-hour traffic, or even the phone conversation I apparently had with Nana, who somehow had Gum Baby’s number.

You know what I do remember?

The sounds of thunder and roaring ocean waves when I first witnessed High John the Conqueror stepping out of time.

“Tristan? We’re here,” said Ayanna.

I sat up and looked around. The SUV idled outside a dingy brown warehouse on a long city block full of dingy brown warehouses. A garage door had a very realistic mural of a vicious Rottweiler on it, along with the words KEEP OUT in bright red, and the side door was covered in BEWARE OF DOG signs. All in all, I didn’t feel very welcome.

“Where exactly is *here*?” I asked.

Gum Baby climbed into the front seat and squinted at the display. “Orange Mound? Where’s that? See? Gum Baby knew she should’ve drove. But noooo, all of a sudden y’all worried about drivers being able to reach the brakes. THAT’S WHAT SAP IS FOR, AYANNA.”

Ayanna gently bonked the little doll on the head with her bat, and the two exchanged silly faces. My lips creased into a small smile. I knew they were doing it to keep from crying over High John.

I looked at Spirit John, still sitting silently in the third row. Ayanna and Gum Baby were oblivious to his presence.

"Okay," I said to those two, opening the rear passenger door and sliding out. "Let's go meet this contact."

"Are you sure this is what you're supposed to do?" Ayanna asked. I shrugged. "It's what… I think so."

She got out after me, her golden-tipped bat strapped to her back, followed by Gum Baby, who immediately climbed up into my hood and started recording our approach with her phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Gum Baby documents everything for her fans, Bumbletongue. Told you to get on social media. My last stream got over five hundred views."

I paused just outside the warehouse's side door. "Five hundred? That's pretty impressive. What were you streaming?"

Gum Baby didn't answer, and as I reached for the doorknob and she aimed the phone at me, realization struck. I craned my neck to glare at her.

"You didn't!"

"Relax, Bumbletongue, Gum Baby believes in getting permission before she records."

I stared at her suspiciously. That sounded like there was another shoe waiting to drop.

Gum Baby stuck a blob of sap on my shoulder and mounted the phone so her hands could be free. "And that's why Gum Baby asked your grandmother to tell her stories about you when you were younger. Gum Baby's making a documentary, see. She's an orca historian."

I grabbed the doorknob and chuckled. "You mean an *oral* historian. Fun fact, orcas are dolphins. So…"

Unfortunately, just as I began to twist the knob, someone inside yanked the door open and I went tumbling into darkness, landing hard on a metal surface that cut my palms. And if that didn't completely derail our attempts at stealth, Gum Baby's shout, which echoed around the warehouse interior, took care of the rest.

"DOLPHINS NEED TO TELL STORIES, TOO, PROFESSOR BUMBLETONGUE!"

A light switched on. Five hooded figures with their faces shrouded in shadow loomed over me and Gum Baby, who'd somehow managed to land on her feet. Four more appeared outside, behind Ayanna, and forced her inside. The door slammed shut.

The good news? No sign of a Rottweiler.

I didn't have time to get up before another hooded figure—taller and carrying a large object on their shoulder—approached. They dropped into a crouch in front of me.

"If it isn't Mr. Mississippi Fire himself," they

said. I cocked my head. I knew that voice.

"Thandiwe?"

She pulled her hood back to reveal red-and-teary eyes. Then the princess of Isihlangu held out her hand to help me up.

"Tell me how he died."

# 19
# THE ROLLING THUNDER

**WE WALKED IN THE SILENCE OF SURVIVORS**.

That's a type of quiet I can't stand. It'll show up at funerals, where people won't speak or will talk in hushed tones so they don't disturb you, when all you want is for someone to disturb and distract you. Or it'll show up when you walk by the bedroom of someone who will never sleep there again, or maybe in the middle of the night, when you wake up and remember that you will never see a certain person on your way to school, to work, to church. That silence ate away at me. It was unnatural, and I hated it. I'd suffered through that silence once. No way was I going to do it again.

"You know," I said, "High John is the one who helped me get over my fear of heights."

We were walking through a wide corridor that—according to the signs hanging on the walls every few dozen feet—used to be designated for forklifts carrying spare railroad parts. Or a bunch of Bigfoots wearing space armor. It was hard to tell, partly because of how old the place was, and also because of all the tags.

The hallway leading to Thandiwe's hideout was covered in graffiti. Hundreds of tags in every color you could imagine. I pointed out a snazzy rainbow one as we walked—Thandiwe and Ayanna in front, me and Gum

Baby (on my shoulder, where else?) behind them, and Spirit John bringing up the rear.

The Isihlangu princess had grown since I'd last seen her. She wore gray leggings with black beads stitched down the sides and a long silver tunic with excerpts from different books printed on the front. There was a skateboard strapped to her back, and it took me a while, but I eventually recognized it as her forebear, the shield she had carried back in Alke. It had transformed like Ayanna's staff had. I didn't see her kierie, the club-like weapon the people of Isihlangu wielded, but I guessed that would've raised a few questions in this world. Unless it too had turned into a baseball bat. I was looking around suspiciously for something like a club when the princess turned to me and raised both eyebrows.

"You?" Thandiwe said, the skepticism heavy in her tone. "The screaming thief of Alke, not afraid of heights anymore?"

"I said I got over them, not that I'm completely unafraid. There's a difference."

Ayanna bit back a laugh as Gum Baby grabbed the collar of my hoodie and pretended to scream.

"NO! NOOOOO! Bumbletongue is too annoying to die! Ooohhh, if only he'd listened to that incredibly brave and fearless orca historian, Gum Babyyy."

I rolled my eyes as the three of them cracked up. "Say what you want, but that time we all flew on Old Familiar, racing the Maafa back to the Golden Crescent, I barely thought about heights or falling."

"Yeah, we knew what you were thinking about," Gum Baby muttered, flinging a ball of sap at Ayanna.

My face turned twelve shades of red as Thandiwe burst into laughter again. She threw her arm around Ayanna's shoulder, who stuck her tongue out at Gum Baby before glancing at me and looking away.

"Well, High John didn't bring *me* a crush," said Thandiwe. "But he did bring me along when he started looking for his stories."

I perked up. "The John tales?"

Thandiwe nodded. "He told you about them?"

I looked behind me, and Spirit John met my eyes. He wouldn't stop following me, and I'd given up trying to get him to speak. I was getting used to him. What was one more ghost haunting my footsteps?

"Something like that," I finally responded.

“Well, we started in Alke, and then after…” said Thandiwe. “Well, after everything happened, we landed here. Something in the area called to him, and we started investigating. He kept saying the spirits around here were upset, and he needed to find out why. But one day we stumbled on some runaway kids and took them in. They wouldn’t talk about where they’d been, or maybe they *couldn’t* talk about it. They weren’t making sense. Something about a talking horse that was chasing children.”

Ayanna and I exchanged worried glances. Was this another one of Cotton’s tricks?

Gum Baby grumbled as her tiny fingers flew across her phone’s keyboard. “Now Gum Baby gotta face rodeo rejects? Enough with things talking when they shouldn’t.”

Just as I opened my mouth to point out the irony, Ayanna dropped back and elbowed me in my ribs.

“Don’t you dare,” she whispered.

I shut my mouth. Everything I was going to say went out the window anyway when Ayanna hooked her arm in mine.

“It’s too dark to see in here,” she whispered in explanation.

*Cool. Cool, cool, cool. Just be cool. Just be—*

“Stop mumbling, Big Head. You ain’t cool,” Gum Baby grumbled as she continued to text on her phone. “Kids these days. Always trying to be cool.”

“ANYWAY,” I said, “before he… Well, High John told me to find you, Thandiwe. He said something about the children.”

Thandiwe stopped at a wide door and whirled around. “He did? What was it?”

I shook my head. “That’s just it—he never told me.”

The princess of the Ridgefolk twisted her face in confusion, then pulled a key from her pocket and unlocked the door. It slid open like a barn door, and bright light and peals of laughter spilled out. Thandiwe smiled at our shocked expressions.

“What?” she said. “I’m a princess, remember? I have to stay in style.” She walked inside and we followed, stepping onto a catwalk that looked over a massive indoor skate park.

Yes.

A skate park.

There were vert ramps and rails winding around mini ramps, quarter-pipes and half-pipes—I even saw a bowl all the way in the back. Everything had been painted in bright colors, from sky blue to neon pink, and—maybe most important of all—kids of all ages skated around having fun.

"Mrs. Z, the owner of this place, said she'd planned on making it a safe space for the vulnerable. Children, especially. As long as we agreed to help them, she let High John and me stay for free and even threw in a few meals when she learned we were searching for others lost like us. Once word got out that we weren't turning away runaways or orphans or kids just needing somewhere to go after school, I guess we got pretty popular." Thandiwe smiled sadly and looked back at me. "High John said it's what you would've done."

I swallowed. Someone shouted at that very moment, and we all looked down to where a young Black girl in denim overalls sat on the warehouse floor holding her knee.

"Sorry," Thandiwe said, "give me a second." She pulled the skateboard off her back, ran a few steps, then dropped it and jumped on top. She rode down the giant ramp, kick-flipped up to the rail, and used it to grind all the way over to where the little girl sat.

I scoffed. "I can do that."

A ball of sap bounced off my head. "Why you always lying?" Gum Baby demanded.

The rest of us reached the floor of the converted warehouse a few minutes later, via the stairs. Thandiwe had comforted the injured skater and was walking her to a lounge on the far side of the space when the little girl stopped and looked at me strangely.

"Who are the new people? They look funny."

Thandiwe patted her shoulder. "Now, Chayse, we talked

about that." "Sorry," the little girl muttered.

I grinned. "Don't worry about it. I guess Gum Baby does look a little funny."

Another sap ball stung my head, and this time it was accompanied by a whispered threat. "Gum Baby's gonna sap your lips together when you go to sleep. See if you can talk slick then."

Chayse was shaking her head. "No, I like her. She's cute."

Gum Baby sniffed and examined her nails, which— Did she even have nails?

“Gum Baby got the drip, what can she say?”

But Chayse pointed behind me. “Him. He’s the one that looks funny, sorryljusthadtosayit.”

I frowned. Him? I turned to find Spirit John still following me, his hands in his pockets.

“You can see him?”

Chayse nodded, and Ayanna, Thandiwe, and I stared at each other. “Wait,” Ayanna said, “who is she pointing at?”

“Spirit John,” I said slowly. “A ghost. Which means she can see spirits… without an adinkra. And if she can do that, that means—”

“She could be at risk,” Thandiwe finished.

We all stared at each other, the implications becoming more horrific the longer we thought about them. If Chayse could see spirits, she had a little magic in her. Cotton would want that, either to use to find more spirits, or to take for himself. Was this why all the children were being taken?

I balled up a fist. “I think we need to call an assembly.”

All the children in the skate park—around thirty of them, ranging in age from seven and seventeen—gathered around the edge of the bowl. Before we joined them, Thandiwe explained to us how the giant structure came to be.

“Apparently, kids used to skate in abandoned swimming pools. But some adults started complaining, so Mrs. Z had this built.”

From the ground, it looked like a collection of two-by-fours and prayers, but when we climbed up a ladder on the back side, a decent bowl awaited. A few kids were skating around inside it, some wearing Rollerblades and some using boards like Thandiwe’s. A Black girl in a hijab demonstrated lip tricks (“Stop making smooching sounds, Gum Baby!”) where she skated up the side of the bowl, paused with the front edge of the skateboard resting on the edge, then rode back down. Everyone else stood or sat and watched, whooping in encouragement after every trick.

Then Thandiwe skated down, and the kids went wild. The princess met the girl with the hijab in the middle and the two of them high-fived. After that, Thandiwe had the bowl to herself.

And she put on a show.

She rolled up one side, grabbed the nose of her board with her left hand and did a handstand with her right. She rolled up the other side, spinning in

midair and landing perfectly. The kids pounded the bowl with their hands and feet and cheered. Ayanna and I screamed right alongside them. It was incredible!

Finally Thandiwe rolled into the center of the bowl, kick-flipped, and came to a stop. She held up both hands and waited for the cheering to stop.

"Who are we?" she shouted.

"ROLLING THUNDER!" everyone shouted back.

"Who are we?"

"ROLLING THUNDER!" Gum Baby shouted in my ear as everyone stomped the bowl.

It did sound just like thunder. I cocked an eyebrow questioningly at Ayanna.

She shrugged. "I don't know, maybe it's a morale-boosting thing."

Someone sat down on the other side of me. It was the girl in the hijab. "You got it!" she said cheerfully. "Rolling Thunder, the best skate squad in all of Tennessee. Hey, I'm Hanifa."

"Ayanna, Gum Baby, and I'm Tristan," I said, gesturing to each of us. I thought about introducing Spirit John but instead chose to wait. We'd find out shortly whether she could see him.

Hanifa nodded at us, then slid her skateboard behind her and pulled her legs to her chest. "A lot of the younger kids were feeling left out, especially the ones still learning to skate. So T"—she pointed at Thandiwe—"came up with the name Rolling Thunder so we could all belong to something."

"Like a family?" I asked.

Hanifa nodded and grew serious. "Some of the kids have homes. Family they go back to after hanging out here after school. But a lot of us don't, and the city is rough. We had to move around constantly, from shelters to hotels to a friend's place. Thandiwe and Mr. H were helping us find permanent living arrangements…."

It took me a minute to figure out that "Mr. H" was High John.

"But now that he's gone…" Hanifa fell silent for a few seconds, then sighed. "I guess we'll have to move on again."

I chewed on that as Thandiwe began to speak from below. I'd never given much thought to kids being homeless. Dad worked with a group shelter back in Chicago, but here, seeing it firsthand and realizing that some of the kids were no older than my cousin Terrence, made me wonder how something like that could happen….

And now Cotton and Patty Roller were snatching kids like the Rolling Thunder squad because they might have magic in them. It wasn't fair.

"Tristan," Ayanna said, nudging me. She nodded into the bowl, where Thandiwe was beckoning me. "It's time."

I nodded, then hopped off the lip of the bowl and slid down inside. We'd decided to address everyone at once—there were too many kids to check them one by one. But now, as I stared up at all the faces, it felt like I was standing in front of a school assembly. For a brief moment it was kind of scary. But as I met each pair of eyes, some black, some brown, some green, and some blue, set in faces ranging from brown to tan to nearly chalk white, I saw the same expression staring back at me. A familiar one.

Anger.

I straightened. I knew anger. Expressed and controlled, anger could be a powerful fuel for change. If suppressed or left unchecked, it could be disastrous.

And there had already been too many disasters for my liking.

"Okay!" I shouted, jumping high into the air and stomping the ground with both feet when I landed. "Everybody clench the muscles in your body as tight as you can. Ball up your fists, grit your teeth, and squeeze!"

Some kids did it, while others looked at me as if I'd sprouted horns.

"That's it, good job, keep going! Pretend"—I opened my eyes and waggled my eyebrows as I whisper-shouted—"like you're holding in a fart."

That did it. Everyone burst out laughing, including a few of the older kids. Ayanna rolled her eyes while Thandiwe face-palmed and shook her head.

"What you just did," I said as the laughter began to subside, "was relax. And you're going to need to do that for what I'm going to show you next— magic."

Murmurs circled the bowl. One of the older kids, a Black boy with three parts in his curly top fade, stood with his arms folded. "You talking about card tricks and stuff?"

"No," I said. I took a deep breath. "I'm talking about magic. Magic from stories and the power in them."

The boy scoffed. "Yeah, right. Ain't no wizards 'round here. That's movie stuff. Why are we even listening to you?"

"Hey!" Thandiwe said, but I held up a hand to cut her off.

“No, he’s not wrong. Why are y’all listening to me? I’m just a kid, a stranger at that. Am I right?”

There were a few skeptical nods. Ayanna looked worried, but I smiled at her. I knew it would come to this, and of all the powers granted to me by the Alkean gods, this was one I knew I could control.

*“Let me tell you a story,”* I said, closing my eyes and squeezing the Gye Nyame adinkra. When I opened them, every surface of the warehouse shimmered in a haze of gold. Sentence fragments inched along the wood of the bowl, while poetry stanzas swirled among the rafters. Love stories. Tragedies. It was the history of the warehouse and the city of Memphis as told by the lives of the workers who called it home.

“Look at his eyes!”

“Holy cow!”

“Is that for real?”

“That’s wild!”

The last comment came from the boy with the curly top fade. I looked at him, and the sheer amazement on his face let me know he now believed.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“It… Dexter,” he said.

I nodded. “Dexter, what if I told you that everyone in this room might have some magic in them? Would you believe me?”

He shook his head, then paused, a guilty look on his face. “I mean, how? Why us? Nothing makes me special.”

I grinned. “I’m afraid you’re wrong, because I’m looking right at it.” He looked confused, but I’d noticed it right away. Each of the kids had a story fragment nestled in their chest, right above their heart. A piece of the story of Alke lived on in each of them. The Diaspor-app didn’t have to tell if they were Alkean or not. As of this moment, to me, they all were. *We* all were.

“But how do we know?” Dexter asked.

I turned and beckoned, and Spirit John walked through the wall of the bowl. Everyone gasped, and a few kids screamed. When Gum Baby flipped out of my hoodie and landed in front of me, everyone cheered. And when Ayanna slid down to join us and held her glowing bat aloft, the golden face on it scowling at everyone, the entire warehouse rang with applause. I couldn’t help it—my grin stretched from ear to ear. It felt like we were

superheroes, and for the first time in a while, a little bit of tension eased out of my shoulders.

*“HELLOOO!”*

The loud voice echoed through the commotion and everyone grew quiet just in time to hear an exasperated question whip through the air. My shoulders tensed up again.

“Now, who is doing all that hooting and hollering?”

# 20
# ERZULIE

**“GRANNY Z!” GUM BABY SHOUTED. “LONG TIME NO SEE!”** Granny Z? The woman who stared down at us from the top of the bowl didn’t look like a grandmother at all. Not that there’s one way all grandmothers should look, you get me, but still—I couldn’t quite put my finger on why the tiny Black woman with the twinkling eyes seemed so odd.

When she joined us in the center and I could get a better view, I thought maybe it was the purple-and-green nylon jogging suit she wore, complete with a pair of Grape 5s that looked fresh out of the box.

Or maybe it was her haircut, close-cropped and curly, with a matching purple lightning streak zigzagging across her scalp.

Or—and I think this was it—it could’ve been how Gum Baby practically leaped into the air to dap her up.

The old woman cackled as she and Gum Baby performed an elaborate handshake that left sap everywhere and me shaking my head. “GB, I got your texts!” said Granny Z. “Been putting that phone I gave you to work, I see.”

Ayanna and I exchanged confused glances, but just then Thandiwe stepped up and gave the newcomer a hug.

“Hey, Mrs. Z, how was your trip?” she asked.

The woman surveyed the area, let her eyes linger on me, and then turned to the rest of the kids hanging around the bowl and made shooing gestures.

“Y’all go ’head and scoot,” she said. “Big ole ears trying to hustle up some talk. Go on now! Otherwise that food I set up by the door gonna get cold.”

That did it. Within seconds the entire bowl was clear of everyone but the five of us. Six, if you include ghosts, and at this point who doesn’t? The sound of whooping excitement echoed throughout the warehouse as the Rolling Thunder fell onto the buffet.

“Now, then.” Granny Z turned toward us, fixed a stern gaze on me, and folded her arms. “What you scaring my children for? Gum Baby, I thought you was keeping an eye on this one?”

The tiny terror had the nerve to glare at me. “Gum Baby never agreed to be a babysitter. Bumbletongue is hardheaded. Working Gum Baby’s last nerve. And the second-to-last one. Two nerves!”

I held up both my hands. “Wait, how do you two know each other?” “See? Ain’t nobody got time to repeat themselves.”

Granny Z sighed. “Now, now, GB. Why don’t y’all go get some food, too, so I can talk privately to Mr. Mississippi Fire here.”

I frowned as Thandiwe gave the old woman a kiss on the cheek. “Why does everyone keep mentioning that?” I complained.

Ayanna squeezed my arm and scooped up Gum Baby. “Stop whining, flyboy, and deal with it.”

Gum Baby stuck out her tongue at me as the three of them left, and a pang hit me in the chest at the sight of the trio laughing and joking together. I couldn’t help but feel that we were missing someone. Junior should’ve been here with us. I’d promised to find him, and so far I’d failed.

Then Ayanna looked over her shoulder at me, brushed back her curls, and smiled, as if she knew I was feeling sorry for myself, and my pang of sorrow turned to something else. Something confusing.

“Nah-uh,” Granny Z said sharply, and I turned to see her wagging a finger at Spirit John, who was trying to follow the others to the food. The ghost boy took on a shocked expression, and Granny Z tutted. “Don’t make that face at me. I need to talk with you, too.”

I empathized with the spirit’s look of terror.

“And you…” She was talking to me now. “Gum Baby helps me keep an eye on strange things, especially when it comes to my children, and I got some words for you.”

Screams of laughter rang in the air, and I raised an eyebrow. “These are all your children?”

“All children are my children,” she said matter-of-factly. “That’s what she told me, and that’s how I move through the world.”

“She?” Not this again!

“Oh, by the grace of Bon Dieu, does no one explain things around here? Gum Baby!” Granny Z stomped her feet.

“Gum Baby ain’t no babysitter!” came a shout.

The older woman beckoned us to come with her, and Spirit John and I trudged behind her out of the bowl and over to a dark office in the back of the warehouse, the only room I could see inside the renovated building. She produced a key from inside her jogging-suit jacket, opened the door, and led us inside. A desk with a wide-screen all-in-one computer on top sat in the middle of the room, with a pair of chairs on either side. I sat in one and raised an eyebrow as Spirit John sat in the other beside me. I couldn’t help but see High John in his face, and it pained me to look at him for too long.

Granny Z stood behind the desk. “What do you know of the loa?” “Low-uh?” I repeated.

“*Loa*, boy. *L-O-A*. The mystères. The links between the High God and his people on earth, served by the mambos, their priestesses. Like my Seraphine.”

I began to shake my head in confusion but stopped. “Wait. I… I met a girl down in New Orleans whose name was Seraphine.”

Granny Z smiled. “One of my brightest. I trained her myself. We serve the same loa, Erzulie Dantor.”

“Erzulie…” I repeated slowly.

Granny Z nodded. “A family of loa that, among other things, are the mothers and protectors of those unable to protect themselves. Those who honor and revere Erzulie Dantor, like Seraphine and myself, have a duty to watch over the innocent. That’s why I say all children are my children, and a child in need is a child the world has failed. And we are failing, Tristan Strong!” She slammed the palm of her hand on the desk. “You, me, Seraphine… we are losing the battle for our children. Evil is gathering in this city right now, and I can barely protect the little ones in here.”

Guilt crept around my shoulders. “I know, but if I can just capture Cotton—”

“You’re ignoring the people right in front of you just because you got something personal brewing between you and that haint. Boy, don’t you see you’re playing right into his hands?”

“I’m helping as much as I can,” I protested.

Granny Z pointed at Spirit John. “So why, boy-who-sees-spirits, boy-who-holds-fire, boy-who-reads-the-story-of-the-land-and-carries-it-to-the-ears-of-those-starved-for-it, haven’t you helped the child who’s been following you like a bleating lamb?”

I looked over at him and then immediately looked away. My mouth opened and closed like a fish trapped in a bowl too small for it, because that’s how the office made me feel at that moment.

“I don’t know,” I finally admitted.

“Well, I do.” Granny Z came around the desk and leaned against it. “It’s because you’re scared.”

“I’m not—”

“Boy, if I say you’re scared, you scared. Ain’t nobody worried about your bravery or your image. You scared of failing a friend. Again.”

*High John lying against the tree beneath the overpass.*

I shook the image out of my head. Granny Z reached out, took my hand, and squeezed it. I opened my mouth to disagree again, and instead, other words tumbled out. “I tried, honestly I did. I tried and tried and tried. But every time I even think about using the shadow gloves, I get so angry I’m afraid I’ll burn down everything in sight.”

Granny Z nodded. “That’s because you letting that anger control you, and not the other way ’round. You think you’re the only one who gets mad? Boy, you read the story of this country, didn’t you? You saw the spirits, the suffering, the violence… and you think *you* get upset?”

Granny Z’s voice deepened. Her fingers trembled on the desk, and the computer rattled. Her eyes closed, and I could *feel* her fury building behind every word.

“Goddesses have been traveling to these shores on the prayers of the defenseless for centuries. We cry when they cry. Suffer as they suffer. Moan as they moan. My children are kicked, beaten, harassed, stolen, abused, abandoned, forgotten, and stripped of their rights every single day. And it’s a sad fact that their abusers are always gonna be afraid that their own sins

will be revisited upon them. And fear makes grown folks act like children. So yes, Erzulie Dantor knows *angry*. The Erzulie will always be angry as long as her children are unprotected. But I can control my anger, *use* my anger. The question for you, Tristan Strong, is why are you angry?"

A boom of thunder crashed around my ears. "I…" The words wouldn't come out. "Why are you angry?"

*BOOM!*

"I don't know!" I cried, shoving my face into my hands.

"WHY. ARE. YOU. ANGRY?"

"Because no one else is!" I shouted, standing up so fast the office chair tumbled backward. Spirit John stared at me curiously. "No one else is upset that children have gone missing! No one else is upset that the story of America has been written in blood! And no one cares that a haunted slave plantation−turned-prison-turned-giant is headed up the Mississippi under the control of a haint made of pure evil! I'm angry because the world keeps telling me I shouldn't be angry."

I broke off, panting from exertion. Granny Z's eyes fluttered open, and the tension seemed to drain from the room. She smiled at me weakly.

"Well, then… what you gonna do about it?" *BOOM!*

That one wasn't thunder. That was something outside banging on the door. Something big.

"What in the—?" Granny Z said, turning around.

Out in the warehouse, someone screamed.

# 21
# THE REDLINERS

**I RACED OUT OF THE OFFICE AND INTO PANDEMONIUM. PANIC LACED** the air as children ran everywhere, scrambling up vert ramps and hiding beneath the bowl's scaffolding. I fought my way through the crowd running in the other direction (yeah, yeah, but, you know… heroes) and skidded to a stop near the front entrance.

The door to the warehouse had been knocked off its hinges. A dozen or so masked grown-ups marched inside carrying torches and chanting, and my jaw tightened as I recognized the outfits they were wearing.

Gray cloaks. Plastic masks with a red slash. One of them held a bullhorn. It screeched when they turned it on and began to address the confused kids.

"ATTENTION, TRESPASSERS! YOU DO NOT BELONG HERE. THE POLICE HAVE BEEN CALLED. I REPEAT, THE POLICE HAVE BEEN CALLED."

I groaned as I recognized the voice. It was the same man from the zoo, the one who had tried to blame the mess they'd caused on me. Harold. Sure enough, Darla, his partner in crime, appeared next to him holding a torch in one hand and a sign in the other (which seemed very unsafe to me), and she shook both of them at the Rolling Thunder squad.

“This warehouse is not zoned for playground activities!” she shouted. “Tristan? Tristan, where are you?”

I turned at the sound of Ayanna’s voice. She spotted me, and she and Thandiwe raced toward me, Gum Baby on the pilot’s shoulder. Her call must have drawn the attention of the masked HOA rejects, because Harold pointed at me.

“Hey, you! I know you—you’re that kid from the zoo. Look, Darla! Darla? Oh, there you are…. Look, it’s that boy from the zoo, the one we tried to pin—I mean, the one who trashed the place and ran! YOU! I’m making a citizen’s arrest. Darla, did you see that? I made a—”

“Now, what in the world y’all think you doing?”

Granny Z rolled through the crowd on someone’s longboard and came to a stop between the two groups. Children cowering on one side, grown-ups hiding their faces on the other.

Granny Z stepped on the tail edge of the skateboard and caught the nose as it shot up into the air. “The last time a group of masked folk came up in my place with torches and demands, I had to hide my babies under the floorboards.”

Harold and Darla nearly fell over themselves in protest.

“Nonsense!” said Harold. “We would never!”

“That is abhorrent and a blight on our history,” said Darla.

“A shame and a disgrace.”

“There isn’t a racist bone in our bodies, right, you all? Not one.”

“We, the Redliners, are the most tolerant and welcoming group you could find!”

“And empathetic.”

Darla nodded as Harold stretched out both hands and said, “We just don’t think you belong here.”

I sighed as Darla tapped Harold on the shoulder and tried to whisper, unaware that the bullhorn was still on and everyone could hear her.

“Harold, dear, you’re saying the quiet part out loud again.”

“Oh,” the bumbling bigot said, lowering the bullhorn and switching it off. “I am, aren’t I? She’ll never let me be the leader again.”

I exhaled as I stared at the red line on his mask. I knew where I’d seen that before—on Patty Roller’s boats that had chased us up the Mississippi. And that meant…

Hoofbeats clopped in the hallway, and I began to shout at everyone to run, escape, find a new hiding place. But it was too late.

Patty Roller rode into the warehouse atop the worst creature I'd ever seen. Worse than iron monsters and hull beasts and even Bear as the Shamble Man. A horse with dying lilies covering his rail-thin frame stomped mud-covered hooves on the floor and then reared to a stop when Patty tugged on his reins. Only a few strings of matted stringy hair served as the mane on his skeletal neck.

The horse swiveled his head to stare at me. His eyes were wilted roses the color of dried blood. The flowers opened and closed as his voice hissed like a dozen snakes threatening me at once.

"So this is the boy." The horse neighed and stamped his hooves. "All this fuss for naught but a morsel. Surprised at you, Roller."

The air flickered as the creature spoke, and I saw a second image of mounted terror superimposed on him: a different horse and rider—one of the torch-bearing marauders I'd seen when I was outside of time in Spirit John's neighborhood.

I gripped my head with both hands.

"Tristan?" Ayanna whispered. "What's wrong?"

I took a steadying breath and straightened. This wasn't the time for the spirit bead to flare. Not right now.

Luckily, Patty hadn't noticed. She was staring around the room of children, a strange look playing across her face. Like… disgust mixed with ambition. Avarice. Greed. And just like that, I was absolutely certain this was the group snatching children. Patty Roller, her masked gang of grown hallway monitors, and this…creature.

"Now, now, Twennymiles, my friend," Patty said, tucking a wayward lily back against the creature's neck… what little of it remained. "Work before pleasure."

The horse trotted forward, leering at the children who shrank away. "Work, pleasure. Same coin," he said.

Thandiwe had been inching toward the left, and Ayanna's fingers were creeping to the baseball bat strapped to her back. I couldn't see Gum Baby anywhere.

"You all got to the count of two to get off my property," Granny Z snapped. "And then Imma show you what we did to them other hooded folk. One…"

“Now!” Patty Roller shouted, and the masked people exploded into action. At the same time, she lunged forward, reaching down from the back of Twennymiles and snatching at the crowd of children.

There were screams.

The hordes of masked intruders surged forward just as the lights went out, leaving their burning torches to illuminate the dark. It was bedlam.

Someone grabbed my arm. I whirled around, trying to free myself, until I heard Gum Baby shout in my ear.

“Quit Tristaning and go! Gum Baby saw that fake tear lady and her scary steed heading out the front.”

I took off with Gum Baby on my shoulder, narrowing avoiding a man in a mask as I raced down the hallway to the door. We burst outside just in time to see the two haints disappearing around the corner, their captive with them.

Ayanna and Thandiwe ran out seconds later.

“Granny Z says… go…. She’s… got this,” Thandiwe gasped.

I nodded and whistled. “Old Familiar!” I shouted.

An alarm chirped (cawed?) twice, and the SUV peeled out of its parking space and slid to a stop in front of us. We hopped inside—Spirit John had already materialized in the third row—and I knocked on the roof. “Follow that horse!”

Everyone grabbed a seat or handhold as Old Familiar took off, and I bit my lip in frustration.

*Why are you angry?* Granny Z’s question came back to me.

I’d seen the child Patty had taken.

It was Chayse.

Once upon a time, a boy in a magical SUV chased two evil ghosts down the freeway.

Yeah, it sounds like a wild story to me, too. Well, it gets even wilder. See, I know you’ve probably seen car chases before. Maybe in your favorite action movie that’s on its thirtieth sequel. Or in a video game that you pleaded with your parents to buy despite the wee bit of violence during that one scene, which was fine, really, you were mature enough to handle it, and besides, Dad always watched wrestling on Friday nights during dinner, so who was setting a bad example?

Sorry, that got a little personal.

Anyway.

The point is, you know what a car chase is. This wasn't your average one. Not when spirits and haints were involved.

Twennymiles ran like he'd stolen something. Which he had—or at least he and Patty Roller had. She clutched Chayse tightly with one arm as Twennymiles covered huge chunks of ground in a single stride.

Ayanna and I sat in the second row of the SUV. I was directly behind the empty driver's seat and watched the steering wheel swivel left and right as Old Familiar navigated around slower-moving traffic. Gum Baby pressed her face against the window on the passenger side, where she rode on Ayanna's lap. "Why ain't nobody honking at that horse? Is Gum Baby the only one concerned?"

"I don't think anyone sees it," I said. We passed a minivan loaded down for a vacation. The family inside seemed oblivious to both the woman with glittering tears flying off her face and the dead-flower horse, though one kid in the back did squint at Old Familiar as we zoomed past.

*The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.*

Suddenly, Twennymiles gathered his legs beneath him and leaped forward, disappearing in a flash.

Thandiwe, sitting in the third row with Spirit John, gripped the back of my seat and leaned between Ayanna and me. "Where did they go? Did we lose them?"

"Gum Baby knew she should've drove!" The doll glared at the silver initials stitched on the back of the driver's-seat headrest and grumbled. "Next time Gum Baby calls shotgun, it'll be a warning."

I ignored her. My senses were tingling—all of them at once. I felt a pull, a familiar tug, and I grabbed a handhold above the door. "Everybody hold on! I think we're stepping—"

A flash. A rumble. Drums. The sea.

"—outside ourselves," I finished.

We were driving on a river in the sky. Not alongside it, but actually *on* it! It reminded me of the floating rivers of Alke, in the City of Lakes. Beneath us was rolling green countryside. This was High John's magic at work. I squeezed the pouch around my neck…. It felt warm in my hands and gave me a teeny bit of comfort. But how could the haints travel like this as well? Twennymiles galloped a dozen yards in front of us, Patty Roller

riding low on his back while gripping Chayse. Another flash, and they disappeared.

We followed, emerging back into the real world.

Except— “Where did the expressway go?” I asked.

Old Familiar now roared up an old country road, a curvy one-lane state road with no buildings, no city lights, and no Memphis anywhere nearby. A shape loomed out of the darkness—a route marker with a picture of the state of Tennessee above it and a two-digit number below.

“Gum Baby,” I said, “let me see your phone.”

She stared at me suspiciously but handed it over, muttering something about me not being responsible. I sighed and tapped the highway route into her phone.

“According to this, we’ve traveled nineteen… no, twenty miles outside of Memphis.”

Thandiwe snorted. “Guess we know how the horse got its name.”

A memory tickled the back of my mind. “‘And the devil was angry that he’d been tricked and climbed on his horse, named Twennymiles, and chased after them.’”

Everyone stared at me. “Was that a part of a story?” Thandiwe asked. I nodded. “Nana told it to me once.”

“Maybe… Maybe it’s time to call in Mami Wata and John Henry,” Ayanna said. She bit her lip as I started to protest and then cut me off. “I know you’re trying to protect them from… whatever it is Cotton used to…” She glanced at Thandiwe, whose face tightened. “What he used to defeat High John, but this is getting serious, Tristan. We can’t do this on our own.”

I was going to argue, but a shout from Gum Baby stopped me.

“Horsey haint ahoy!”

We looked out the front windshield to see Twennymiles leaping into the air and disappearing. Old Familiar followed.

Flash. Drums. The sea.

We were on a set of train tracks deep underground.

Flash.

We were barreling through a neighborhood of lush lawns and mansions.

Flash.

We tore through a field with sunflowers stretching overhead and the smell of damp earth filling the air.

Flash.

Giant buildings with faded signs crowded us on both sides.

SHOES SHOES SHOES! read one.

GENTLY EDITED TEXTBOOKS! said another.

SANITIZED BIOGRAPHIES OF APPROVED HEROES! said a third.

Gum Baby climbed onto the dashboard and pressed her face against the windshield. “Gum Baby got a bad feeling about this place.”

Thandiwe nodded. “Same here. Where is everyone? The stores are open, but…” Her voice trailed off, and I finished the thought.

“They’re empty. This looks like an outlet mall. We used to go to one outside Chicago called Gurnee Mills. You could find a big selection of shoes and pots and stuff—at least that’s why we’d go. This one, though… I’ve never heard of a store for discounted textbooks.”

Old Familiar screeched to a halt. I leaned forward, searching the darkness.

“What’s the matter? Did you lose them?” I asked.

The headlights turned off, and the SUV slowly reversed.

“Hey, we have to keep going forward! They took Chayse into one of these stores, I bet!”

But the car kept reversing. I muttered underneath my breath and opened the door.

“Tristan,” Ayanna called, “what are you doing?”

“You all want to find the missing children, so that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Yeah, but…” She looked around. “This doesn’t feel right. They could be anywhere.”

Old Familiar slowed as I leaned out the door, then stopped so I wouldn’t hurt myself. The horn cawed softly, but I ignored him. No way were those haints going to get away with kidnapping Chayse. It was my job to stop them, right? That’s what Seraphine and Granny Z and Thandiwe and everyone kept telling me. I had a responsibility. Well, this was me being responsible.

“Stay here, then,” I said. “I’ll do it by myself.”

Ayanna leaned back, hurt, and I turned away and began jogging toward the large building in front of us, the one with the brightest lights. A faded rectangular spot stretched over the front door, and I saw the sign that used to hang there lying overturned in a patch of weeds.

“Wait!” came a shout from behind me. Ayanna, with Gum Baby on her shoulder and her bat in hand, and Thandiwe, with her longboard strapped to her back, ran up to me. Apparently Spirit John had decided to sit this one out, which was fine with me.

“You’re Tristaning again,” Ayanna said. She grabbed my arm and linked it with hers. Thandiwe did the same on the other side. “And friends don’t let friends go Tristaning alone.”

I smiled. “Whatever,” I said, feigning annoyance.

A flash of light and the sound of a camera shutter went off behind us, and we all turned to see Gum Baby—who’d hopped down and snapped a picture of us—now typing furiously into her phone. When she saw all of us glaring at her, she put a hand on her hip.

“What? Don’t look at Gum Baby like that. Y’all wanna follow Bumbletongue into the spooky death store, go right ahead. Gum Baby is with the bird-mobile on this one.”

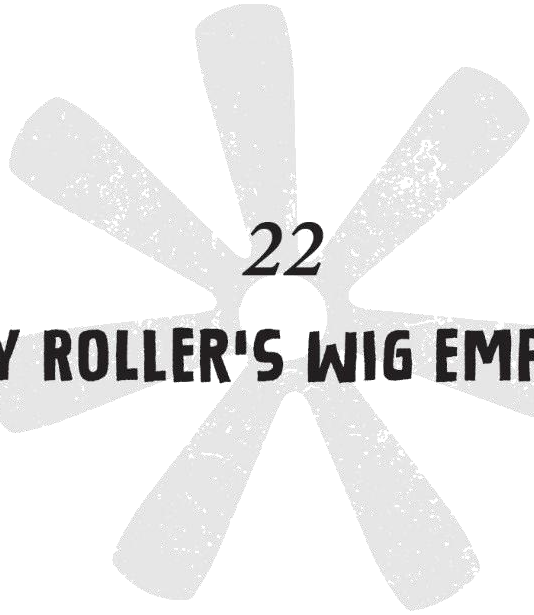
Old Familiar had parked at the far end of the old worn parking lot, the SUV’s hazard lights blinking in warning.

“It’s fine,” I said, trying to comfort everyone. “This might not even be the right spot. We’ll peek in, see if we can find them, and if we don’t, we’ll duck out and keep looking.”

“Oh, Gum Baby thinks you found the right spot for sure.” The tiny doll trotted in front of us, crawled beneath the sign, and flipped it over. We all stared at the letters that appeared to have been painted with something I didn’t want to look at too closely.

“‘Patty Roller’s Wig Emporium,’” I read. “‘Prices… to die for.’” The front doors hissed open.

We all stared at each other. Finally, with a gulp, I took a step forward and my friends followed. Even Gum Baby, though she muttered about it being a bad idea the whole time. And as we walked into the outlet store, I was beginning to agree with her. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the doors —which hissed shut behind us— were the mouth of something horrific ready to swallow us whole.



# 22
# PATTY ROLLER'S WIG EMPORIUM

**NOTHING MOVED INSIDE**.

Have you ever visited an outlet strip mall? Giant stores lure customers with the promise of amazing discounts, the deal to end all deals. Shelves are stocked with products you've never heard of, or weird stuff you've seen advertised on TV—all two-a.m. hangover purchases, as my dad called them. I'm not sure what a hangover is, but if it made me buy an automatic toenail clipper that looked like two machetes taped together, I wanted no part of it.

But inside Patty Roller's Wig Emporium, the products weren't weird or unnecessary. They were just…wrong.

Four aisles awaited—metal shelves that towered to the ceiling and stretched off into the gloom. I couldn't see what lay at the end of them. Giant posters dangled at the front of the aisles, each with a different style of wig pictured on it. I squinted. A couple looked like the kind of thing Patty Roller would wear.

An intercom crackled in the darkness, and a prerecorded message began to play.

*"Welcome to the Wig Emporium, your one-stop shop for fitting into human society!"*

Human society?

*“Here you’ll find a wig to suit your everyday needs. Have a history lesson you need to embellish? Try our no-nonsense Lecture Wig.”*

A small spotlight illuminated the poster at the far end, which showed a gray bun wig with horn-rimmed glasses attached to the sides.

*“Gentrifying a community for eventual displacement? Try our special, the Currency Combover.”* The next poster to the right lit up, showing thinning brown hair parted neatly down the side.

As the speaker continued to play, I motioned to my friends to huddle up, and I pointed toward the aisles. “Okay, let’s split up. Each of us take a row and check to make sure Patty or Twennymiles aren’t hiding there. You find something, you shout, okay?”

Ayanna and Thandiwe exchanged glances. Gum Baby folded her arms and shook her head. “Gum Baby don’t split nothing. She don’t split checks, split ends, or split up search parties. That’s how you get got, Bumbletongue, and Gum Baby don’t. Get. Got.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, y’all. Ayanna?”

She squeezed her bat between her hands. “I’m with Gum Baby this time, Tristan. We should stick together.”

I shook my head. “And what if Patty escapes? This might be our only chance at catching her.” I turned to Thandiwe. “You’re with me, right?”

The princess of Isihlangu took her longboard off her back. With a tug on the wheels, it expanded into a wide oval, and straps appeared on the underside. Thandiwe slipped her left arm into it, wearing it like a shield. Then she pulled on the right front wheel—and kept pulling—until a long staff appeared and separated from the shield. She fastened the three remaining wheels to the end of the staff, so it looked like a club with multiple heads. Pretty cool trick.

“I think we should stick together,” she said. “But if you do insist on splitting up, stay alert.”

She handed me the converted club and I stared at it. “Is this a kierie?” The preferred weapon of Isihlangu’s warriors was formidable. I’d seen Thandiwe batter iron monsters into smithereens with one.

The princess smiled. “What? You can take the girl out of the mountain, but you can’t take the mountain out of the girl. Not in this neighborhood.”

I snorted. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Okay, y’all

ready?” “No,” said Thandiwe.

“Gum Baby is doing this under PROTEST!”

Ayanna blew out a puff of frustration. “Fine,” she snapped. “Just… be safe.”

“When am I anything but?” I asked.

The look all three of them gave me forced me to clear my throat and move toward the aisle all the way on the right. “Anyway… you see anything, you shout. Got me? Shout.”

With that, the four of us crept down our assigned aisles. But it wasn’t until I’d stepped into mine that I realized the store’s speakers were still playing their intro message.

*“Finally, if you are a meddlesome insect who insists on selfishly interfering with our plans to better society—”*

I stopped moving and stared at the wall above me, where a dusty speaker covered in cobwebs and black mold had been mounted next to a security camera. The cam swiveled until I could see the red dot pointed right at me.

*“—we have the perfect wig for you. So come on in. Let’s get you fitted.”* I gulped and continued on. Patty Roller *was* here. And she was watching us. For a second I thought about calling out to the others, but that would alert the haint to the fact that I was onto her, and she might run again. No. Better to pretend I was unaware. Then we could turn the tables on her. But where was she hiding? And was Twennymiles with her?

I tiptoed along and tried not to stare at the gray faces on the wig packages on the shelves next to me. The eyes in the product shots seemed hollow, and the Snow White bob inside every package reminded me too much of Patty Roller.

All sounds were dampened. My footsteps echoed in the dark, my breath huffed, and the wind outside tried to beat down the doors, but that was it. I couldn’t even hear Gum Baby complaining. I really hoped that was a sign that everyone was being stealthy and not… something worse.

Another camera swiveled ahead. *“Today’s sales include fifty percent off our History Erasure wig, and a buy-one-get-one-free special on all wigs designed to trap self-proclaimed heroes.”*

Something crinkled behind me.

I froze, then peeked over my shoulder. Nothing. But when I started to sneak forward, there it was again, the sound of something crinkling. Like when you try to open a bag of chips quietly so no one tells you to wait for

dinner (not that I've ever done it, but you know exactly what I'm talking about). I paused again, then kept going. More crinkling. Whatever was happening, there was more than one person doing it. I almost shouted for the others when I noticed a sign on the wall—SECURITY OFFICE—and an arrow pointing to a door up ahead.

Of course! The cameras following my movements… Patty Roller had to be in the security office. I moved quicker now, still keeping an ear out for whoever—or whatever—was behind me, but I had her now.

The office door was cracked open, and the flickering silver-blue light of a TV or computer monitor spilled into the aisle. I readied Thandiwe's kierie, took a deep breath, then shoved the door open and dashed inside.

"Where is Chayse?" I shouted… to an empty room.

A desk sat in the middle of the space, facing a wall of security monitors. On the desk was a telephone—the kind that can control PA systems—with the receiver off the hook. A smartphone had been taped to the mouthpiece.

*"Ahh, there he is,"* said a voice. It came from the cell phone and echoed through the store. *"Tristan Strong. Come to save the day, little boy? Come to play hero? Such a brave little man. Smart, too. Look how he sacrifices three friends to save a child he barely knows… and still fails."*

Sacrifices?

Movement caught my eye. The monitors. I moved closer, then inhaled sharply as I watched Gum Baby, Thandiwe, and Ayanna on three different screens. They moved down their aisles, looking this way and that… while something followed them. Shadows. The shapes were too quick and too many for me to be able to tell what they were exactly, but they scaled the tall shelves and moved along the tops.

*"Yes, welcome to Patty Roller's Wig Emporium,"* the voice said, and I could hear the smirk in the haint's voice as I turned and raced out of the office. *"Where lives are changed…forever."*

I sprinted toward the end of the aisle. "It's a trap!" I shouted. "Get out!" "Tristan?" Ayanna called. "What do you—" Her voice cut off, and fear filled my muscles.

"NO!" I screamed. I ran like I'd never run before. The breath ripped out of my chest and my lungs screamed for air, but still I ran. I slid to a stop before rounding the corner at the end of the aisle, and my foot kicked something. It crinkled. I looked down to see one of the cellophane bags that the Emporium's wigs came in. The bag was open, but the product shot

remained inside, and I squinted at it. Something seemed different about it. Hadn't there been a— My eyes went wide. The gray expressionless face, the one that had given me the heebie-jeebies, was gone.

The shadows!

A scream snapped me out of my shock, and I sprinted around the corner. There was an open space near the rear of the store, and the roll-up door for deliveries was partway open. I continued running and then, at the last moment, dropped into a baseball slide and shot beneath the gap, landing on my butt outside.

Nothing.

"What in the—" I got up, spun around, and recoiled in horror. Hundreds of gray shadows peeled themselves from the exterior wall of the store. They had no facial features except eyeholes—empty spaces that revealed the world behind them. The beings walked on two legs and had long arms that flailed like those wacky inflatable tubes outside car dealerships. But these weren't funny. The arms ended in whiplike fingers that twisted in the wind. The fingers cracked like gunshots as they curled and uncurled, and their claws sent up sparks when they scraped the ground.

High John, with a trio of gashes in his cloak, appeared in my mind. Could these be the Breakers he'd tried to warn me about? Their fingers definitely looked like they could break someone. I swallowed, fear suddenly making my movements sluggish. If they could tear through a god, what chance did I have?

I backed up, squeezing the kierie tightly. The weapon would be useless against so many. I needed to use the akofena, the shadow gloves. I began to clench my fists… then stopped. What if the building caught on fire? My friends were still inside. No, it had to be the kierie.

"Tristan!" Ayanna's voice came from the right. A door opened and she poked her head out. "Tristan?"

One of the gray shadow creatures in front of me began to shiver. A mouth appeared where there had been nothing before, and it was wider than any mouth I'd ever seen. It screamed… and it sounded just like Ayanna!

The shadows lunged toward me at once, and I swung the kierie with all my strength. It connected with a few, and several of the Breakers popped into clouds of noxious smoke, but others swarmed forward. Sharp claws raked my back, and I screamed in pain.

"HEY, PICK ON A HERO YOUR OWN SIZE!"

Gum Baby flipped out of nowhere, her hands moving in a blur as sap rocketed through the air. Breakers exploded into smoke five at a time. I limped forward to help her, but she disappeared in a crowd of foes. I tried fighting my way free, but there were too many. We were being overwhelmed.

Suddenly Gum Baby yelped in pain. I flinched. I'd never heard the tiny doll make that sound, and it terrified me.

"Get off Gum Baby!" she screamed. "Tristan!"

"Where are you?" I shouted. A Breaker lunged at me and I dodged, slipping to the right and sweeping it aside. "Gum Baby!"

"Tristan!"

My fear turned to anger. I bulled my way forward, swinging the kierie left and right. "Where are you?"

A screech rent the air. "They're hurting Gum—"

Her voice cut off. I froze. No. No, no, no!

A harsh caw filled the air, and tires squealed as Old Familiar drove around the corner of the building. Thandiwe surfed next to it on her forebear, sparks shooting into the night as she held on to the driver's-side window. The two slammed into the crowd of Breakers, scattering them like leaves. Ayanna slid over the hood and attacked from the other side of the SUV, her bat glowing red-hot. The Breakers fled beneath the combined attack, into the shadows, where they disappeared.

But the damage had been done. A tiny figure lay on the ground at my feet, unmoving, and I sank to my knees. My hands trembled as I reached out, expecting a snarky complaint and a ball of sap at any moment. But… there was nothing.

Nothing except a lifeless wooden doll.

# 23
# THE GODS HATE REDLINERS

**NO ONE SPOKE TO ME**.

Old Familiar drove us several hours north via back roads and two-lane highways. Ayanna sat in the seat next to me, Gum Baby cradled in her lap, and stared out the window for the whole trip. Thandiwe sat in the front passenger seat. Every now and then she'd look back at us, open her mouth, then close it and turn around. Spirit John hadn't moved from the third row. We rode like that for an eternity.

Finally we parked near a small dock in the middle of nowhere. The sun was just beginning to peek above the horizon, and the Mississippi River gurgled past, brown and mysterious. There the gods convened—three of them, at least. Nyame and Keelboat Annie had traveled with Mami Wata on the *River Queen* to meet us. Apparently Nyame and Annie had been out west looking for more lost Alkeans. Annie, dwarfing everyone, wore a pair of denim shorts and a wrestling T-shirt, her big hair pulled back into her trademark puff. Nyame, on the other hand, wore Lakers warm-ups with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's picture on the back of the jacket ("Sky hook for the sky god," he said.). A pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses was pushed up onto his head and always seemed to catch the sun.

Nobody glanced my way as they all walked into Mami Wata's meeting room and shut the door behind them, leaving me out. Served me right. I'd been so focused on tracking down Patty Roller that I'd never even considered the fact that the haint could be leading us into a trap. Because of that, my tiny friend was…

The door to the meeting room opened.

"—like they stripped the magic right out of her."

Nyame's voice carried as Ayanna stepped into the corridor. She nearly stumbled when she met my eyes. I couldn't read the expression on her face, but she turned and walked in the opposite direction.

My heart sank even further. I wanted to run after her to tell her that I'd tried, that I missed Gum Baby, too. I took a step toward her.

"Tristan?" Mami Wata called me from inside. "Come in, please."

I stopped in my tracks and watched Ayanna disappear into another cabin. After a deep breath, I turned and stepped into the meeting room. Keelboat Annie leaned against the window on the far side, while Nyame sat in a chair with his fingers laced behind his head. Mami Wata was on her throne, and I was glad to see that she looked less tired today, but her expression could've been chiseled out of stone.

"You disobeyed your instructions," the river goddess said with no preamble. "From now on you are confined to quarters, and under no circumstances are you to leave without the prior approval of one of us three." She rubbed her temples and shook her head. "By Alke's brooks, we *will* get you home safe and sound."

I fiddled with my adinkra bracelet. "But what about Cotton? And Patty Roller and Twennymiles and the Breakers? Do we know where they are? What if—"

Mami Wata cut me off with a raised finger. "You. Were. Grounded. For your safety and everyone else's. And instead of telling us about the Memphis clues, you went and snuck off, putting your life in peril."

Keelboat Annie cleared her throat. "Tristan, there's no sign of your escaped haint or his walking prison anywhere. We looked while you were out. I done checked all the rivers, along with Wata, and ole man Nyame over there's been scouring the skies. Cotton must be laid up somewhere."

"We're still looking," Nyame said, "but until then…" The sky god lifted his hands as if to say *It's above me.* But like… he was the sky god. You shouldn't be allowed to say *It's above me* when your domain is the sky.

“Leave this to us,” Mami Wata said.

She took a deep breath, and for a moment I saw pain etched on her face, like lines in the sand of a riverbank. It was hard to remember that others felt the loss of High John and Gum Baby just as much as I did.

But it was frustrating!

It seemed like we weren’t doing anything about anything, just shouting and yelling and going back to our daily struggle of existing. I could feel anger lurking in the tips of my fingers and in between my shoulder blades. I took a deep breath. Then another. I looked down at my shoes and told myself, *Stay calm, Tristan. Stay calm*.

“I know—we know—it’s been hard,” Nyame said. “High John was our friend, too. One of our champions. And Gum Baby was… She was special. To all of us. We will mourn them, and they will—”

“They’re not dead,” I said.

Silence fell over the room. Then Nyame asked, “Excuse me?”

“They’re not dead.” I didn’t look up from my shoes. “Gods can’t die. Not if you carry their stories in your heart and on your tongue. Right?” Now I did raise my head, and the god and goddesses had that expression adults wear when something they’ve said comes back to bite them in the butt. It would’ve been funny, but for once I didn’t want them to be wrong. I wanted them to agree with me.

“And I’m an Anansesem until you all take it from me, so if I carry High John’s story to Chicago with me and tell my teachers, tell my friends, tell anyone who’ll listen, he can’t be dead. That’s what y’all told me. Gods can’t die. And Gum Baby, maybe she wasn’t a goddess, but she walked the walk that gods are supposed to, so I’m including her in this, too. And gods can’t die. Right? Gods can’t die! Gods, no, LISTEN—” I backed up as Keelboat Annie walked over. “Gods can’t die and they are NOT DEAD! They aren’t dead. They…”

Keelboat Annie enveloped me in her arms and shushed me as anger roared through my limbs. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair.

Someone cleared their throat behind her. “Tristan…” Nyame began. “About you being Anansesem…”

The engines shuddered, then stopped. The *River Queen* fell silent, and we all looked at each other. I stepped back from Keelboat Annie, embarrassed at the wet spot my tears had left on her shirt. She tousled my hair, and then we all turned as Ayanna burst into the room.

“You have to see this!” she said, out of breath.

Trouble floated ahead of the *River Queen.*

When I saw who it was, however, I groaned and face-palmed at the same time. Face-groaned. What did I do to deserve this? Keelboat Annie glanced at me as she retied her ponytail and gripped the fractured keel pole she’d turned into a weapon. No, really. She wielded it like a quarterstaff, even though it was almost wider than me!

“Friends of yours?” she asked.

I let a long exhale slip between my fingers before I stood up straight and glared over the rail. “I need friends like them like I need a cramp in my side. They call themselves Redliners, and they’ve been messing up everything for days now.”

A half dozen boats floated in a line and blocked the river. They resembled the ones that had escorted Patty Roller before the ghost of the USS *Cairo* blew them to smithereens. Gray, with a red stripe along the hull. I mentally kicked myself for not making the connection before.

“HALLOOO THE STEAMSHIP!” Harold shouted across the water.

How could I tell it was Harold? Easy. He was using that same dirty, dented megaphone, and his mask barely covered his face. Was he wearing sunglasses beneath it? And there was Darla next to him, arms folded across her chest.

Mami Wata marched to the bow of the *River Queen.* Her stare could wither stone, and I could see Harold shrink beneath it as the river goddess’s shout echoed across the water. “Why do you block our way?”

“WELL, YOU SEE—AND YOU’LL HAVE TO FORGIVE ME, BECAUSE I HAVE NOTHING AGAINST YOU AND YOUR KIND, WHAT WITH THE HAIR AND ALL…”

I could feel Mami Wata’s glare intensifying to gale-force winds. I was surprised the Redliners weren’t blown completely out of the water.

“…BUT I’M AFRAID YOU CAN’T COME THIS WAY. WE’VE GOT TO KEEP THE DEPARTURE ON SCHEDULE, AND IF YOU MESS IT UP, WE’LL ALL BE IN TROUBLE. SO NO DICE, I’M AFRAID.” Harold dropped the bullhorn and shrugged apologetically.

“And why,” Mami Wata said, her voice low and cold, “do you think we’ll be any trouble?”

“Oh, right! Because of who you are.”

“Excuse me?”

Harold squirmed. “Not you, exactly. I’m sure you’re fine. You remind me of a coworker, actually, and she’s never any trouble. Barely talks to me, as a matter of fact. Can you imagine that?” “Yeah,” I muttered, “can you imagine?”

“So no, it’s not you,” the Redliner said. “It’s the boy.”

I froze. Keelboat Annie noticed and moved to the right a bit so I was shielded from his view. Nyame walked up beside Mami Wata and stood with his fists on his hips. Harold gave him a small wave.

“Hey there, sir. Nice shirt. Basketball? Love it. But, as I was saying, the boy. Is he aboard? I hate to ask, but could you bring him out and turn him over to us? We have a citizen’s arrest outstanding, you see. It’s not an official thing, but once we bring him to the police, I’m sure it will be. Got to protect our spaces, right?”

Darla’s whisper echoed through the bullhorn. “Harold. The quiet part? You said it out loud again.”

“Oh, sorry, dear. Ha-ha, I keep doing that, don’t I? Don’t tell the boss, okay? She said I’d be demoted the next time.”

As they talked, I backed up. There was no telling what trouble those two and their gang of kid-snatchers would cause. And while I was sure the trio of Mami Wata, Keelboat Annie, and Nyame would easily take care of them should a fight break out, the other Redliners were pointing cameras at the *River Queen*, which let me know that, whatever the outcome, Harold and Darla would make sure the evidence worked in their favor. No, the best thing I could do was leave. But how?

I slipped down the stairs and grabbed my bag from the meeting room. Then it was a mad dash to the aft of the boat. I only hoped there was a lifeboat or dinghy I could use to escape, like last time. A few of the carved mermaids raised their eyebrows at me as I climbed over the guardrail and peered at the hull below.

No lifeboats.

Now what was I supposed to do? Jump in with a life vest? Maybe if got a running start I wouldn’t have to swim as far and…

“Going somewhere?”

I looked back to see Ayanna on the deck behind me. She was unamused. I glanced around again, giving the area one final check, then sighed and

climbed back over the railing. “I can’t be here,” I said. “You all will just get lumped into trouble along with me.”

“And so you’re just taking off without saying good-bye?”

“I don’t want anyone else getting hurt—or worse—because of me.” “You don’t get to decide when and where your friends have your back,” Ayanna said angrily. “That’s. Not. How. Friend. Ship. Works.” She jabbed a finger into my chest with each syllable. “Friends are there for you, period, full stop. Do you understand?”

I opened my mouth to respond.

“No, be quiet and listen for once,” she said. I closed my mouth as she continued. When Ayanna got going, her eyebrows scrunched up and her curls tumbled all over the place, no matter what hair tie or clip she tried to use. More importantly, I knew she was right. But what was I supposed to do? How can you need someone by your side and also want them far away so they’re shielded from harm?

“Tristan?”

I blinked. Ayanna had a strange look on her face. Was she blushing? “You’re just staring at me,” she said. “Sorry,” I blurted. “I agree.”

“With what?”

I thought about it, then sighed and shrugged. “Everything you just said. If we’re going to do this, if we’re going to find Cotton and Patty Roller and put a stop to their plans, we’re going to do it together. No more splitting up. No more silly heroics.”

Ayanna shook her head. “Be heroic all you want. Just remember we’re fighting, too. We’re a team. Right?”

“Right.”

Some of the tension drained from her shoulders and a small smile crossed her face. I smiled back at her, and I can’t lie, it felt good to know someone would have my back no matter how wild the adventures got. Warm and bubbly and like I was floating.

Someone snickered nearby. Thandiwe stood on the stairs with a sly look on her face. “Why don’t you two just hurry up and say it?”

My face flushed. “Say what?” I asked, my voice cracking a bit. The princess covered up another grin. “Never mind.”

Ayanna shot Thandiwe a look I couldn’t decipher, then turned, her expression all business again. “Ignore her. But if you’re serious about

leaving, I think I know a way we can do it. You might not like it, though." *"Pffft."* I folded my arms. "Try me."

"Okaaay… but don't say I didn't warn you." Wait, warn me?

The tip of Ayanna's bat began to glow, and the wood trembled in her hand. It shook left and right, then lifted into the air. The round barrel began to flatten and stretch, widening until it was the size of a couch. My jaw dropped.

It was a brand-new flying raft.

"GAAAHHH!"

My weight shifted, and I could feel myself starting to slide off as the raft zipped just above the ground, twisting around a stand of trees. I couldn't wait to see the internet buzz about my doom. *Boy Flattened into a Pancake in Bizarre Raft Accident Outside St. Louis.*

Deep inhale. "GAAAHHH!"

I lay flat on my back, spread-eagled, my fingers desperately trying to find purchase in the wood. What I wouldn't have given to have Gum Baby sitting on my chest right then and pretending everything was fine. I would put up with a million of her Bumbletongue insults just to endure her precoffinary measures one more time. Even in the terror that gripped my stomach as Ayanna's new raft swirled and dipped, I felt the sadness.

And beneath the sadness, doubt whispered.

*All you bring is disappointment.*

Finally, after what seemed like hours but which Thandiwe informed me had only been ten minutes or so, Ayanna slowed down and checked behind us. She'd taken a route that shielded us from view as we fled the *River Queen,* backtracking along the Mississippi before cutting through an abandoned farm and going north along the eastern side of the river. Now we floated just above a patch of wildflowers in a meadow near a freeway.

"So… what next?" Thandiwe broke the silence between the three of us.

The edges of my vision flickered. I turned my head to see Spirit John sitting on the raft beside me. Because of course. I rolled onto my side to look at the flowers instead.

*Gum Baby should be here, too.*

Ayanna glanced at me, as if waiting for me to take charge, but I continued to stare at the flowers as I now clutched my backpack to my

chest. A pair of butterflies fluttered from petal to petal. It reminded me of the Thicket back in Alke, and the first time I'd brought a story to life. A cloud of butterflies had reenacted the time Gum Baby had broken into my grandparents' house. It was the moment when everyone realized I was an Anansesem.

*No longer an Anansesem.*

"We need to find the Rolling Thunder," Thandiwe said. "They trusted me, and I let them down. Who knows where they are right now, and how scared—" Emotion cut off her words.

Ayanna patted her arm. "We will. And when we do, we'll make Cotton and Patty Roller pay."

"How?" I asked quietly.

They both turned toward me, and Ayanna stared at me in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"How will we make them pay? Nothing we've done so far has worked. They've got everyone twisted to their side. The Redliners, the police, the news… I'm glad I don't have the SBP, because I'd be scared to see what people on the internet are saying about us right now."

"So we should just give up, then?" Thandiwe demanded.

"Of course not. I just… I don't know." I gripped the backpack tight, and Ayanna watched me.

"What's in there?" she asked suddenly. "You're clutching it like it contains all your worldly possessions."

I hesitated. Then, with trembling fingers, I unzipped the bag. Inside, her eyes closed and lying incredibly still, was Gum Baby. "I couldn't leave her," I explained. "Not with the Redliners threatening everything. And… I'm so used to having her nearby. On my shoulder. It hurt to leave her behind."

The two girls exchanged glances again, then scooted closer to me. I closed my eyes as they hugged me. So much pain. So much suffering. For what? First the spirits, then High John, now Gum Baby. Was I doomed to be constantly in mourning? Did I have to keep prayers on standby? Sorrow at the ready? The hits just kept coming, and I couldn't even dodge them. One after the other, they just came rolling along, like Anansi's Train of Despair.

My fingers stilled.

*I done checked all the rivers, along with Wata, and ole man Nyame over there's been scouring the skies. Cotton must be laid up somewhere.*

*We've got to keep the departure on schedule.*

*Like they stripped the magic right out of her.*

I let out a long, shaky exhalation. Ayanna and Thandiwe stood up and peered at me in confusion as my fists tightened and released. Tightened and released. Finally, after several seconds of trying to maintain calm, I looked at them both. The sun set behind the raft in golden rays. We were running out of time.

"I think I know how Cotton is transporting Old Angola," I said. "And I think I know where he'll be next."

Ayanna brightened and reached for her rudder to control the raft. "Can you guide us there?"

I shook my head. "No. But *he* can."

And I touched Spirit John.

# 24
# THE HIDDEN CITY

**WITH THE CONNECTION I'D MADE WITH SPIRIT JOHN, HE BECAME** more solid. Even Ayanna and Thandiwe could see him now. This is what he said, through me:

My name was John. Not Johnny or Jonathan, not Hey, Boy or—well, you know what they called me. I was just plain John, and I wasn't born a slave. Remember that. I wasn't born a slave.

("I think he wants us to remember

that." "Hush, Thandiwe.")

Now, it ain't important that, midway through a trip from my family's pecan farm in Tallulah to a market in Vicksburg, mounted men calling themselves patrollers forced me and my brother to prove we weren't slaves.

("You had to prove you weren't a slave?")

It also ain't important that they ripped up those papers and locked us in chains anyway, or that the law the patrollers claimed we'd broken wasn't fair. It was the law, right? Over the next three years me and my brother broke several laws, including trying to escape from our plantation prison, trying to trick the man who demanded we call him Boss, and even just talking about anything close to freedom. Especially that last one. Might've been a hundred laws telling us what we could and couldn't talk about, when

it was allowed, and who we could talk about it with, too. *If the mouth is moving, work is stopping*—that's what the man who wanted to be called Boss said. But the talking and the not-talking, that ain't important. No, the important thing is *how* we could talk.

("I'm confused."

"I think I actually understand."

"You do? Ayanna, don't lie."

*"Shh."*)

Now some Sundays, his lordship and most honorable, the man who wanted to be called Boss, graciously allowed the people who actually worked the fields to rest. To recover. To rejuvenate. Planting, tilling, and harvesting that cotton, rice, and sugar drained the body and the soul. So us workers would make a little music. Sing some songs. Tell a few stories. Sometimes the man who wanted to be called Boss drifted by and listened in. He never heard anything alarming and would nod in a way that made it seem like he knew exactly what he was hearing. Songs and stories.

But you and I know different.

("Is he talking to Tristan now?"

"I think so…. Now *shhh*, I'm trying to listen!")

You and I know the might of a song. Of a story. The meaning tucked inside the words and the melody. Stories are power. The power to laugh at a system that treats you like property, at a man who claims to own other men, women, and children, and to laugh without getting caught.

("Wait…. He's talking about the John tales!")

The power to send messages, messages that lead to freedom. *Swing low, sweet chariot, coming forth to carry you home.* That's what is important. That is what you should remember. Because I did. I wasn't born a slave, and I didn't die a slave—the power in the stories made sure of it.

"Tristan?"

I opened my eyes. Thandiwe and Ayanna stared at me carefully, both of them with their hands raised. "Yes?"

"Let go of the rudder," Ayanna said slowly.

I looked down. My left hand gripped the raft's steering bar so tightly my knuckles were turning white. I frowned and unpeeled my fingers from the wood. When I glanced back up, the two girls had relaxed a bit, but they still seemed tense.

“What happened?” I asked.

Ayanna took the control and nudged me aside. “While you were telling John’s story, you started flying us into the middle of nowhere.”

“I what?”

A finger tapped me on the shoulder. Thandiwe. She pointed down. I looked over the edge of the raft, then winced and wished I hadn’t.

We were hundreds of feet up in the air. A weed-covered field sprawled beneath us, with old rusted train tracks—six, no, seven sets, all lined up next to each other as they curved away into the distance. Evening had arrived. Under the glow of flickering streetlights, I saw that I’d apparently flown us to an abandoned railyard.

“I thought you said you knew how Cotton was moving the haunted plantation?” Thandiwe frowned as she looked between me and Spirit John. “How does this help us?”

Ayanna was right—we *were* in the middle of nowhere. Even Gum Baby’s phone had trouble finding us on the basic Maps app. I wished—for the umpteenth time—for the SBP. Regardless of the tension between Anansi and me, we could’ve used his help about now. I rubbed my face, trying to will the exhaustion away. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Spirit John couldn’t guide us, and I was just clutching at straws. Maybe—

“Um, what is he doing?” Ayanna looked more than a bit

concerned. “Who, me?” I asked. “I’m not doing anything.”

“Not you,” she said. She pointed at Spirit John.

I’d forgotten the ghost and I were still connected. It had become so common for me to be the only one who saw him. Usually he followed me and appeared at random, hands in his pockets and a tiny smile on his face. Now, however, he stared over the edge of the raft with an intensity that was almost scary. Like something was down there. Something dangerous.

“I don’t see anything,” I said, peeking over the edge again with a loud gulp.

“I thought you said High John helped you get rid of your fear of heights,” Thandiwe said.

“Baby steps,” I muttered. The princess laughed, and I turned away in a huff, only to raise my eyebrows as Gum Baby’s phone chirped. It had finally downloaded a map with higher resolution. I frowned.

“This says we’re in a place called National City. Never heard of it.”

“Let me see.” Ayanna leaned over to stare at the screen. “Population zero? No one lives here?”

Thandiwe looked over the edge again. “I could’ve told you that. It’s a ghost town.”

My head swiveled at her words and locked on to Spirit John. *A ghost town.*

“What if…” I began to say, then licked my lips and tried again. “What if the reason the gods couldn’t find Cotton or you”—I looked at Thandiwe —“or the children who are being snatched off the streets is because they aren’t hiding in this world?”

The two girls looked at each other. “What?” they said at the same time.

This sounded wild in my head, so I knew the two of them would look at me like I’d sprouted an extra nose when I said it out loud. “What if Cotton’s hiding…*with* the spirits?”

I reached out, took both their hands, and closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the world was on fire.

No, that wasn’t quite right. Beneath us, a city *built* itself out of fire, like a fuse in reverse, sparking in the night and leaving a trail of silver flame in its wake. It was an architectural Big Bang, but instead of creating the universe, it gave birth to National City.

I couldn’t keep my jaw from dropping. And from the way Ayanna and Thandiwe gripped my hands, like they were my anchors to reality, I knew they were just as amazed as I was.

I mean, I could see houses twinkling north of us, and stores and parks to the south. The train tracks shone bright gold in the darkness, but they disappeared beneath a giant building—a train station?—that dwarfed the entire area. It was huge! Not so much tall as wide, and surrounded by fences on all sides. Tall gray metal panels separating pockets of this spirit city from everything else. Tiny pinpricks of light moved around inside the fences.

“Tristan?” Thandiwe squeezed my hand.

“Hmm?” There was something weird about all those tiny dots of light. Like, they seemed familiar.

“Tristan, what is that?”

“What is what?”

“Look!”

I dragged my attention away from the dots of light—it was really hard, like pulling yourself away from your favorite book mid-sentence, even though you already know what's going to happen. Because I thought I knew what those dots of light were. I knew *who* they were. But my brain refused to believe what my eyes were telling it.

*Can't wait to tell Memphis* that *one*, I thought.

And then I looked at what Thandiwe was pointing at.

"That!" she said.

"We have to help," Ayanna said quietly. I glanced at her. I didn't know whether she was talking about what I'd seen beneath us or the mayhem Thandiwe had pointed out.

Either way, she was right.

At the far end of National City, a crowd of spirits streamed across a bridge that led into a small town. From this distance I could almost pretend they were racing and the noise I heard was cheering. Almost.

Spirit John moved up alongside me. The older boy's face was tight with anger and fear. From the way my teeth were clenched, I knew his expression mirrored my own.

Another persecution.

A deafening roar shattered the air. My body twisted in pain.

"Tristan!"

I realized my mistake when I saw Ayanna's lower torso nearly fade away. I'd started to let go of her hand! If they were going to stay in this spirit realm and see what I saw, they had to hold on to me.

"What was that sound?" Ayanna asked. Her voice was trembling.

"That," I said, "was Cotton's monster. Look!" I pointed with my chin.

Trees shook on the opposite side of the train station, and Old Angola burst out of its hiding spot in the woods. My knees nearly gave out. It was even larger than before! It stood almost as tall as the station, and more of those steel doors had grown in its chest. It was impossible to miss. But I didn't see Cotton riding on it. Had he left his spirit-eating monster here to roam in this dog run for monsters?

I shook my head. None of that mattered. Regardless, Old Angola would devour everything in its path! I had to figure out a way to stop it.

"Um, what is happening down there?"

Thandiwe's question pulled my attention from Old Angola to the fenced areas below us. The dots of light (come on, brain, you know who they are,

why can't you admit it?) were lined up and being funneled into the train station. One of the giant doors had opened, and I caught a glimpse of iron and steam before the door shut again.

A screeching whistle blew inside the building, and Old Angola roared in answer. The spirits screamed and began to run the other way, while the dots of light (*You can say it*—children*. They're children with pieces of Alke's stories inside them. That's what the lights are, Tristan.*) disappeared into the station.

"Tristan, we need to do something!" Ayanna shouted above the noise.

I hesitated. What could we do? Distract the monster until the spirits could get away? Or try and save the… children being herded inside?

"Tristan?" Thandiwe was staring at the kids. The look on her face rippled between horror, anger, and frustration. Ayanna had tears in her eyes. We had to act. But… the girls could only help if I kept them anchored in this spirit world, I realized. If I let go, they disappeared.

Fine. I wouldn't let go.

"We have to head off the spirits first!" I shouted. "If Old Angola eats them, it'll grow even more powerful." I looked at Thandiwe, whose hand trembled in mine, but she nodded. "We'll come back for the children. I promise."

Another promise made. Could I keep this one?

No, I couldn't think like that. I turned my back to Ayanna and told her to put her hand on my right shoulder. Then I placed Thandiwe's hand on my left shoulder. I looped the straps of my backpack, with Gum Baby inside, over their extended arms, and for a brief second it felt like we were all together again, flying off to fight monsters. Movement caught my eye. I looked behind me, and Spirit John stood tall, his face troubled. But the boy nodded at me and then reached out and placed his hand on my back as well.

There. Still connected to the people I cared about.

Now if only I could keep them all safe.

"Watch out, watch out, watch out!"

"There! Go, go, go!"

"Get out of the way!"

With the flying raft, we battled the prison monster in the middle of the train tracks. And by *battle* I mean we tried to annoy it to death. Another one of my superpowers! It stood between us and the giant station. We stood

between it and the spirits fleeing the race-riots-on-repeat on the bridge. I could hear the victims' screams. Feel their terror. Just like I could feel the evil seeping from Cotton's twisted creation. And where was that haint? I had a nagging thought in the back of my mind. He wouldn't leave his monster unattended. Cotton relished control. Maybe he—

"Watch it!"

Ayanna sent the raft through a cluster of spirits and between the legs of Old Angola. I ground my teeth. *Focus, Tristan. Cotton can wait—his monster is the priority.* The haunted plantation prison−turned-giant bellowed a challenge, then slammed down a massive fist made of cinder blocks and haintacles (that's haint-tentacles, keep up with me, now) that barely missed us. Ayanna, one hand still clinging to me, put the raft into a tight 180-degree spin, pointed it upward, and sent us ripping across the monster's face. Several of the doors on its chest swung open as it lunged forward (OMG, what *was* that inside?), and Ayanna put on a burst of speed.

"That got its attention!" I shouted.

We swerved as Ayanna dodged the other fist, then twisted into a corkscrew spiral when several haintacles lashed out at us. We flew down and across the train tracks, barely skidding above the ground. My hoodie flapped behind me like a cape, and I nearly shouted at Gum Baby to hold on as we swerved and dipped. Old Angola lumbered after us, then pounded the ground with both fists and retreated. We were trying to lure the monster away from the spirits fleeing the violence, but it seemed unwilling to move too far from the train station.

*Hmm*, I thought.

Ayanna peeled away from the monster and headed toward the terrified spirits. Their pain stabbed my heart. We couldn't see the hate-filled people who had pursued them in life. But the spirits were doomed to repeat the most traumatic moments of their existence over and over and over again.

Ayanna must've realized the same thing at the same time. Her hand squeezed my shoulder. I put mine over hers.

"What can we do for them?" she asked.

*What can* you *do for them?* is what I heard. And I didn't want to let her down, but still…

I knew she felt my hesitation, because the raft slowed. "Tristan?"

"I… could try and read their stories…. Find out what happened to them."

“There’s hundreds of them!” Thandiwe yelled. She had her forebear in shield mode, and her makeshift kierie batted haintacles aside left and right. “We don’t have time for one-on-one sessions.”

I grabbed the adinkra bracelet with my right hand. “I can try to read them all at once.”

“What?!”

“Have you even done that before?” Ayanna and Thandiwe shouted at the same time.

I tried to put on a confident grin and nodded. “Yep. High John showed me how.” I didn’t mention that it didn’t work right the first time. Or that there’d only been a fraction of this number of spirits then. This was how I could prove to the gods that I was still an Anansesem, and, at the same time, release the spirits from the cycle of violence they were trapped in.

I only had to stay in control.

Another whistle shrieked twice inside the train station.

“Is a train about to depart?” I asked, turning to look, only to duck as something whipped over my head.

“Watch out!” Thandiwe cried as she avoided another haintacle and sent it twisting away with a backhanded swipe from her kierie. How she managed that while still keeping a death grip on my left shoulder, I’ll never know.

I took a deep breath. Showtime. I gripped Nyame’s adinkra but didn’t close my eyes. Instead, I stared at a single point—the bridge. Focused on it. Didn’t blink, didn’t look away. Even when Ayanna sent the raft soaring upward, I maintained eye contact. My eyes began to tear, then blur, and right before I was going to have to rub them and start over again, a glint of gold appeared. Slowly, letter by letter, like an invisible hand performing calligraphy with ink made of starlight, words replaced the outline of the bridge.

I’d done it! High John would’ve flashed his wide grin and clapped me on the back if he was here… but he wasn’t.

Spirit John moved beside me, as if sensing my thoughts. He kept one hand on my arm and stared at me until I nodded. Right. There were still more people to save.

*Don’t hurt my baby! If I can just get over this bridge, they won’t hurt my baby.*

The first spirit we flew past had her story cradled in her arms, written in a soft orange cursive that peeked out of a blanket like a swaddled ray of sunshine. I murmured her story, committing it to memory.

The next (*Please let them boys be at home, please, please, please…*) carried his words in a bag, and they knocked together like old-fashioned soda bottles.

"This is going to take too long," I muttered. I let my eyes scan the spirits running across the bridge as Ayanna brought us to a floating halt on the National City side. It felt like someone was stretching my vision wider so I could see more. I needed to see more.

*I moved here to get away from the lynchings!*

*Where are they, where are they?*

*Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama. Ma—*

Still not enough. I needed more stories. Even though reading each heartbreaking tale was like taking a surprise punch to the ribs over and over and over again, I kept going. I had to.

*They grabbin' folks. I can't do this. Where's Dina? We need to get in the car and go, I don't care where. Oh God, we gotta go….*

*Run, run, run, run…*

*Daddy?*

More. MORE! Read more, Tristan! I could feel sparks of anger in my hands as I read fragment after fragment of spirits reliving the riots that had trapped them here. But I forced myself to keep going. I could control it. Use Mr. Richardson's Angry Octopus and all that.

Somewhere, from miles away, I heard Ayanna calling to me. I wanted to let her know it'd be fine, I was okay, I just had to read more stories faster, but my lips weren't moving. I could only read.

*Gotta get away. I ain't got nothin' left but the air in my lungs, and they ain't takin'—*

*Lord help me, I can't run no more. I can't run no more.*

*My granddad built this house, and I'm not leaving it for nobody.* "Tristan!"

Ayanna's fingers dug into my right shoulder as Thandiwe shook my left. I blinked. The air shimmered in front of me. I looked down, and my heart plummeted.

My arms were burning with the black fire of the akofena.

"No," I whispered.

Old Angola's roar split the night. The monster had finally found something tantalizing enough to lure it away from the train station it was guarding.

Me.

The black flames crept up my arm. To my shoulders. Toward the hands of my friends who were trusting me to keep them anchored in this spirit world….

I had to keep them safe.

Old Angola was only a dozen yards away when I turned to look at Ayanna. She saw something in my eyes and opened her mouth to protest, her hands trying to hold on to me. But I shrugged out of her grip…

… and tipped forward to fall into one of Old Angola's open steel doors.

The last thing I saw was Ayanna's face—twisted into a scream—fading as she returned to the real world and darkness swallowed me.

# 25
# ALKE IS A STORY

***FIND THE PULSE OF THE STORY. LET THE RHYTHM BEAT LIKE A*** *heart, and hold on to that pulse once you got it. Don't change it, no matter what anybody else says. Even if they call you a liar or selfish, or say you lucky to be here, or tell you to go somewhere else if you so unhappy, you don't let it go. Then speak those words. Tell the story.*

**Punishment**: noun. Infliction of a penalty as retribution for an offense.

I've been punished before. Got detention for disrupting class. Was suspended for fighting. I'm not proud of how I acted those days after Eddie died and before Mr. Richardson started helping me through counseling. The school had rules, and I broke them—that was an offense. And I guess fighting doesn't help kids learn, does it? So I could understand that.

*What crime did* I *commit? I didn't do anything! I was walking, laughing, joking, standing, sitting, driving, running, existing, and now I'm here! Dark and alone, nothing but me and shadows, me and this concrete, me and a slice of sunshine one hour a day.*

The voice broke through my foggy dreams. A whisper, or maybe a mutter. It came from somewhere to my left. I was lying facedown on a cold

floor, my cheek pressed up against what felt like steel. I rolled over and tried to open my eyes.

But my eyes were already open. It was just pitch-dark in… wherever I was.

Fine.

I reached for my adinkra bracelet. Maybe I'd been knocked unconscious and the Isihlangu spirit bead had worn off. I could reactivate it, or maybe even use Gye Nyame, the sky god's charm. Either one would reveal my predicament and help me find a way out of here. Simple as—

My wrist was bare.

For two seconds—one Mississippi, two Mississippi—I couldn't comprehend what had happened. I continued to squeeze my right wrist with my left hand, as if the act would summon the bracelet and everything would be fine. Instead, the only thing it brought was the first tendril of panic snaking up my spine.

What should I do? What *could* I do? I had no powers anymore! The last thing I remembered was falling off the raft, severing Ayanna and Thandiwe's connection to the invisible world of spirits and stories. And Old Angola had attacked… Had I been captured? Where was I? Where was Cotton? I vaguely remembered falling through a doorway. The image of the steel doors mounted on the prison monster's chest flashed into my mind. But there were no haintacles wrapped around me, no roars or thundering footsteps. Just a subtle rocking back and forth.

I reached behind me, searching for my backpack and the comfort of Gum Baby. Silent or not, her weight on me gave me strength I never would've admitted to her when she was…

When she was…

My fingers met with air. I wasn't wearing the backpack.

No. NO!

My hands shot out, searching, colliding with a wall to my left and a wall to my right. The same in front and behind. No backpack. Just four walls, all squeezing in on me, silent and brutal. Trapped. I was trapped in a box, locked in the dark and alone.

Metal screeched and a sliver of light appeared a few feet in front of my eyes—a slot had opened in the door, revealing a barred window. A harsh white glare stabbed my pupils, and I blinked several times. Then I rushed

forward, desperate for a breath of fresh air and a glimpse outside. Maybe I could…

But no, there was no door handle. No way for me to escape the box I was locked inside. I couldn't help but think of Spirit John's story, of being imprisoned in a tiny space as punishment for talking about freedom and his right to humanity.

I pounded the door and shouted, "Hey! Can anybody hear me? HEY!"

Nothing. Only the sound of my ragged breathing and a strange rumbling in the floor. But then, from outside my view, I heard someone chuckle— smug and dismissive.

"Now what did I tell you, my boy? Didn't I say you'd come to me? Boy, you fell into my arms like you was running home."

A face moved in front of the bars, its features cast in shadow, but I recognized the profile. And I knew the voice.

"I tell you, Tristan," Cotton said, "we're going to bring light to this country, my boy, mark my words. And you did your part!"

Cotton held up a fist. My bracelet dangled from his fingers, and he shook it at me.

"You're a hero," he said. "Because of you, me and Old Angola here ain't gotta rustle up any more spirits. You collected 'em for me! All it took"—the humor dropped from his tone—"was the power of the gods. Job well done."

I climbed to my feet even though every part of me, from my hands to my feet to the muscles in my jaw, wanted to stay on the floor.

"You're not going to get away with this," I growled. My voice shook with anger.

"Who's gonna check me?" Cotton laughed. "Your gods? Boy, let me tell you a thing or three—them gods of yours are in for a rude awakening, they rightly are. This world don't give an owl's hoot if someone can fly. It'll pluck the wings from their backs and put them in their place. But it ain't gotta be like that for you. Hop on my team and we'll be running this place by morning."

I shook my head. "You're a liar." My voice trembled, but I wasn't going to let the haint see me rattled, even if the only thing holding me up was that little bit of light coming through the slot. "I would rather sit in the dark than watch you play god. You're nothing like them. And when I get out of here,

I'm going to put you back in your place—a lovely blue glass bottle dangling from a tree."

Cotton snarled and lunged. His clawed hands slipped through the bars on the window and snagged my collar, dragging me forward until my face pressed against the cold steel.

"Then stay in here and rot, boy. Meanwhile, I'll be taking over this country, city by city. I was gonna rest here awhile, let Old Angola plant himself so he can feed… but you know what I'm thinking now? I'm thinking we got all the power we need from that ole trinket of yours, so we can travel a bit and settle down wherever I feel like. Wherever I can have the most *fun*."

My heart skipped a beat. "No…" I whispered.

Cotton watched my face and leered. "Oh yeah, my boy. We're going to have a blast. Your friends and family and your tired little gods will make a good snack for my little baby prison." The haint straightened and backed up. His head tilted. "Now that he's had a taste, of course. That High John and… Gum Baby…mmm-mm."

My fist slammed forward, but Cotton was too fast. He danced away and I ended up with nothing but bruised knuckles from the bars.

A whistle shrieked and Cotton retreated out of sight, calling back to me as he departed. "I'll leave you a little light so you can see it all, my boy. Witness the transformation. This world ain't gonna know what hit it!"

And with that, the haint disappeared, whistling a tune that grated on my ears, and leaving me with one thought thundering in my skull.

*We're doomed*.

Black is a rainbow.

As light from the outside world flickered through the slot in the door, as shadows shifted around me, and as advice from elders and ancestors echoed in my ears, those four words Nana had paid an artist to put on the back of the Strong family reunion T-shirts floated to the forefront of my mind.

I thought I understood them now. On the wall next to the corner I had slumped down into, I saw the faces of loved ones who had helped me become the person I was today. My parents. My grandparents. Uncles, aunts, cousins (even Terrence). Eddie. Thandiwe. John Henry, Miss Sarah and Miss Rose, Nyame. Keelboat Annie and Mr. Richardson. High John the Conqueror. Gum Baby. Ayanna. A kaleidoscope of brown, dark like the

shadows I cowered in, as bright as sunlight peeking through morning clouds, and infinite variations in between.

Black is a rainbow that arches overhead for all to see. But the beginning of our rainbow, even though we know it is there and we talk about it, has been hidden from us. The story of our bloody arrival has been buried and sanitized. Why did it take magical powers to read about it? And where does the rainbow end? What's the point of looking for it if our pot of gold is burned up whenever we try to claim it?

Black is a rainbow, like the swirling colors on an oil slick viewed at just the right angle. The pain is there, but so is the beauty. I had to hold on to that.

I muttered those four words to myself over and over. They were all I had left.

Time passed. I don't know how much. The light remained constant, as did the rocking of the train. (Yes, I'd finally figured out that Cotton was riding the rails, with me in tow.) We could've been traveling for minutes, or maybe hours. I think I fell asleep at one point, dozing right there in my squat, my back pressed against the wall and my head on my knees.

The light from the window in the door rippled. I looked up and blinked. Was it my imagination or was the room getting brighter? No. Not the room. The light—it split into a thousand tiny little beams, as if someone outside was holding a prism in front of the bars. The beams shifted and curved while growing brighter, until—

I let out a sharp gasp. "You… But how?"

No answer came. It never did. Instead, Spirit John stood in the tiny cramped cell with me. He smiled and jerked his chin as if to say *Come on.*

I remained where I was, baffled beyond belief. "How are you even here? How can I see you?" This was impossible. I had no adinkra. No spirit bead from Isihlangu. No powers. No magic. Right? I reached for the root bag High John had given me, tucked under my shirt. Cotton must've ignored it. But that wouldn't let me see spirits. I didn't understand.

Spirit John cocked his head. The older boy wore a look as if he knew something I didn't. He shoved his hands into his pockets and jerked his chin at me again.

Nothing made sense. I waved my right hand through the air, just making sure I could see myself, that this wasn't a dream. I patted my legs, pinched

my cheeks, and rubbed my stomach, staring at my body to confirm I was really present.

And that's when I saw it.

"Sweet peaches," I whispered.

There, imprinted on my chest like a spiraling onyx-and-silver tattoo, was a thread of Alke. A strand of the magical land's story. It coiled above my heart and gleamed with a shine too bright to be anything but magic.

Suddenly the unpredictability of my powers made sense. I'd been calling upon the magic of Alke through the adinkra. But this fragment of magic—the same I'd seen inside the members of the Rolling Thunder and the children kidnapped in National City—had been coming to my aid as well. It was like turning on the tap and having Niagara Falls rush out of your faucet. If you weren't expecting it and didn't have a way to contain it, what do you think would happen? Chaos, that's what.

When I looked closer, I saw that my fragment, unlike the others I'd seen, wasn't just one thread. Instead, different colors had been braided together. The silver of Isihlangu, the gold from the Golden Crescent, sapphire blue from Nyanza, and more. Each region of Alke, woven together.

"Black is a rainbow," I said.

Spirit John's grin grew even wider.

I stood and stretched, ignoring the tight space meant to keep me small. It had been designed to stifle and crush, to grind down whoever entered. No doorknob? No problem. I raised my fists, clenched them, and squeezed. I imagined the strength of two worlds coursing through my blood—one of flesh, one of stories.

I didn't need to look down to see the flaming boxing gloves of the akofena. The heat in my burning fists was proof enough.

*CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!* My fists hammered against the metal. *CRASH!*

The heavy steel door exploded outward. It slid across the swaying floor and disappeared, three giant dents and all. I stepped outside my prison cell, fists still on fire. Took a look around.

We were on the last car of the train, an open-sided cargo container that was scuffed and beaten and covered in graffiti. Gray lightning streamed past us on either side. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of a building, or trees, or

even a lake as we traveled over a bridge, but otherwise it felt like we were traveling outside of time.

“A spirit train,” I muttered. “No wonder we could never find Cotton. I wonder where we are now?”

Then I shook my head. That didn’t matter. We’d stop where we’d stop. It was what—and who—was on the train that mattered to me. Where was Cotton? I wanted to smoke him, and the black fire crackling on my fists proved it. I turned toward the front of the train and looked at Spirit John. The boy’s grin was positively feral now, as if he relished the fight to come. I didn’t blame him one bit.

“Let’s go start a riot,” I said.

# 26
# THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN

**HERE'S WHAT I KNOW—ANGER UNCONTROLLED IS CHAOTIC AT BEST**. At worst? It's a time bomb. But anger leashed, anger harnessed, anger shaped and molded and given purpose? It can be a tool. A hammer for building up. An ax for chopping down. A fire for starting over.

As Spirit John and I moved from car to car, the black fire rippling up my arms and flickering around the six shadow gloves surrounding me, my anger grew with each step. With every beat of my heart. This time, however, I didn't let it rage out of control. I didn't let it get the best of me. I put it to work.

"Another one?" I asked. Grunted, really.

Spirit John nodded.

We stood in a converted passenger car, the last one before a dining car. This wasn't packed full of Amtrak luxury, however. All signs of comfort had been ripped out. That left a dark, narrow passageway with gray doors on either side. Rusted brown locks had been fastened on each, sealing the occupants inside. We'd already opened nearly two dozen compartments, freeing kids of various ages. Every one had the magic of Alke within them,

untouched. I still didn't know what Cotton's ultimate plans were, but I didn't need to. I just had to stop him once and for all.

When we were at the second-to-last door, I glanced at Spirit John. "Let them know I'm coming," I said.

Spirit John walked through the door. I waited outside, counted to three, and backed up when I heard startled shouts come from inside. The ghost boy reappeared and nodded to me again. I took a deep breath and dropped into a boxer's crouch. Then, in an explosion of movement, I stepped forward, twisted my hips, and clipped the lock with a giant hook. The scorched metal shattered and shot away into the dark, and I was able to slide the newly unlocked door open.

Four children—three toddlers and a boy maybe a year younger than me —huddled in the corner. Threads of Alke coiled from each of them, and the story of their capture drifted slowly around them in wild, sloppy script. The handwriting of fear.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I marveled at the way all of Alke's magic was manifesting inside me at once. Could the same thing happen for these children if they were shown how to control it?

Spirit John stepped into the compartment behind me but then faded through the wall, I guess so as not to scare the kids any more than they already were. But… I don't know, maybe exit through the door instead?

The older boy in the group wore a pair of glasses and a T-shirt with the names of authors on it. For one long and excruciating heartbeat I thought it was Eddie. The resemblance… Before I could stop myself, I held out a hand, ready to dap him up. He just stared at it, and I cleared my throat.

"We're here to free you," I said gently.

The boy didn't move. Instead, he looked toward the wall where Spirit John had disappeared. "Was that a…a…"

"A spirit," I said. "Yes."

"Ghost!" one of the smaller toddlers said, a girl with a fuzzy bun on top of her head and a thumb in her mouth. She spoke around it one more time for emphasis. "Ghost!"

I squatted in front of her. "He's a *spirit*," I said. "An ancestor, here to help. He and I are partners."

Another of the toddlers, a boy with thick curls and a button nose, frowned. "Aunt-cestor?"

“Like Auntie Jendayi,” the girl said. She nodded at me as if we were on the same page. I nodded back while stifling a grin.

“What are your names?” I asked.

They all looked toward the older boy. He hesitated, then cleared his throat. “Kweku. That’s Marcus, Ruby, and Baby Lewis.”

The curly-headed boy, Baby Lewis, smiled. “I’m named after John Lewis!”

Ruby looked puzzled. “Your arms are on fire,” she said to me. “You should stop and drop.” She thought about it, then added, “And roll.”

Kweku stood up and moved in front of the toddlers, who were trying to count the akofena shadow gloves. “Are the… things gone?” he asked me. “The ones with the claws?”

Breakers! Were there some on this train? We hadn’t run into any in the other passenger cars. I swallowed a lump of fear, remembering how they’d swarmed me outside Patty Roller’s Wig Emporium. Gum Baby was the only reason I was still alive.

If the Breakers were somewhere up front with Cotton, Gum Baby was probably there, too. I had to get her back—who knew what Cotton or his minions would do with her? She had saved me, and now it was time to return the favor.

I stood and looked Kweku in the eye. “I’m not sure. That’s why you need to take the little ones and move to the back of the train. Quickly. There are other kids there—tell them all to hide until I say it’s okay to come out. We’re taking over this train.”

“I can help fight!” Kweku said eagerly.

I shook my head. “The best thing you can do is keep the others safe. That’s your job, and I’m trusting you to do it. Can you?”

The boy swallowed his disappointment and nodded. I held out a fist, and this time we did dap up. He gathered the toddlers together—sort of like herding kittens—and began to move them quickly toward the rear of the train. I watched them leave, then turned and looked at Spirit John, who’d reappeared at my shoulder.

“Let’s go,” I said.

The final door had several locks on it, and that gave me pause. The Redliners really didn’t want whoever was inside to escape. Good. The more I could mess up their plans, the better. Let them stress—they were

gatekeepers, and we were smashing our way through their barricades. Starting with this door.

The shadow gloves incinerated the locks. I slid the door aside, then peered into the gloom.

A familiar face looked back, and I nearly fell flat on my behind in surprise.

"Tristan?"

I took a deep breath to douse the akofena flames and reached out into the darkness. A thin brown hand grabbed my own, and I pulled the skinny boy to his feet. He didn't let go as he stared at me, then he limped forward to give me a hug.

"Thank you," Junior said.

Junior had always been thin, but now he was all bones and a shadow. Who knew how long he'd been in that cell? His eyes were wide and red, as if he hadn't slept in forever.

"I thought I'd never get out of there," he whispered. "Some nights I thought… I thought Cotton was right. That no one was coming for me. That my father—"

"Anansi never stopped looking for you," I interrupted, jabbing a finger into Junior's shoulder. "Never. It's all he thought about, day in and day out. If he were here, he'd tell you that himself. Cotton likes to hurt people where they're most sensitive. But he's going to get his. If it's the last thing I do."

"*We* do," Junior said, correcting me. He held out a hand to shake. "If it's the last thing *we* do." I grinned and grabbed it, and we stood together, two sons of Alke. You get me?

Spirit John appeared at the opposite end of the car, beckoning urgently. I nodded at Junior. "Let's get started."

The three of us stepped cautiously into the dining car. No one was inside. Just tables and booths bolted to the wall on one side and a small bar on the other. Plates and dishes were scattered everywhere. Claw marks gouged the walls, floor, and ceiling. Breakers.

But it was the last table, near the door to the next car, that grabbed my attention. A backpack sat on top—black with silver straps. *My* backpack. I was running toward it before I realized my feet had moved. I lifted it, unzipped it, and a strangled sob escaped me.

Gum Baby was still inside. Unmoving, but untouched.

I looked through all the other pockets. No sign of the adinkra bracelet. Cotton must still have it. *We got all the power we need from that ole trinket of yours….*

My fingers angrily squeezed the straps of the backpack as I slipped it over my hoodie. Something clattered to the floor, and I stooped to pick it up. Gum Baby's phone! Now I could get word back to the others. I flipped it open, hoping that magical Alkean reception would work here, pressed the key for the *River Queen*, and waited.

"Gum Baby?" a familiar voice asked hesitantly. I sank against the table in relief.

"Ayanna, it's Tristan," I said. "You all made it back okay?"

"Tristan!" Her voice grew distant as she shouted to someone in the background. "It's Tristan! Tristan, I'm putting you on speakerphone. Um… wait. Mami Wata, how do I put a mermaid on speakerphone? Press what? Tristan, can you hear us?"

"Yeah," I said. The smile on my face had to be stretching from ear to ear.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Ayanna said. "When you fell you disappeared, and we spent *hours* looking for you. Don't ever do that again! I will strap you to my raft and fly you to the moon if you scare me like that a second time. You hear me?" Her voice trembled a bit, and I swallowed whatever snarky comment I was going to make.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good! Better be the last time you stress me out, boy. Got me all worried."

"That means you've been thinking about me," I said, still grinning like a doofus, before my brain caught up with me and I realized I'd said that out loud.

Junior let out a small laugh, and I felt my cheeks bloom with heat.

*No, no, no, that wasn't supposed to be an outside thought—that was an* inside *thought!*

My heart thumped like a rabbit trapped in a box. Silence stretched on the other end, and I thought about hanging up and staying on the spirit train for the rest of my life. It wouldn't be that bad an existence. A few Breakers would be nothing compared to the sweaty-palmed, hot-necked embarrassment I currently felt. I could live under the very table I stood in

front of, surviving off floor food and whatever was behind the bar. Hermits are cool these days.

"Whatever thoughts are in my head," Ayanna finally said, "are between me and the bigheaded boy who comes back safe. Do you understand?"

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding (yeah, yeah, I know, everybody does it once) and slowly, doofusly, the smile returned to my face. "Yes, ma'am. I understand."

"Good."

A new voice—louder, deeper, and definitely NOT Ayanna's—interrupted. "If y'all reckon y'all finished, maybe we could think about saving this here world? But only if y'all finished."

Wait, nope, the hermit life was back on the table. Under the table. Never forget you're on speakerphone, folks.

Ayanna must've felt the same way, because I could hear embarrassment coloring her voice when she spoke again. "Tristan, that's—"

"John Henry," I said, sinking down into a toddler crouch. "I figured."

"Well, everyone's here. John Henry, Mami Wata, Nyame, Thandiwe, and Keelboat Annie. Miss Sarah and Miss Rose are on their way with reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?"

"I'll explain later. I don't quite understand it myself."

"And Anansi?" I asked, glancing at Junior. The boy stiffened. I still hoped to convince the trickster god that I was worthy of the Anansesem title, and maybe his son could help persuade him. But the long pause at the other end of the phone didn't bode well. Sure enough…

"Anansi isn't here." That was Nyame speaking. "It's…complicated."

Grown-up−to-kid translation: We're uncomfortable talking about it. Mami Wata spoke next. "Tristan, where are you? Ayanna came back and said you'd been fighting a monster. Are you safe?"

I hesitated, staring at a trio of gouge marks on the floor in front of me. "Safe enough, I guess. But there are kids on this train, a bunch of them."

"Kids!" That was Annie's voice.

"Yes, and I found Junior."

The cheer on the other end was so loud, I had to pull the phone away from my ear. This time it was Junior's turn to blush, and I grinned and threw a mock punch at his shoulder. There was a collective sigh of relief, and then Mami Wata broke in. "Do you know where the train is headed?"

she asked. “We’re moving fast, and once the *Queen* gets going there isn’t any stopping her, not while I’m on board. But we need a destination.”

I shook my head in frustration, even though they couldn’t see me. “No. Spirit John and I were trying to figure that out when we found Junior and… well, that’s when I called you all.”

“Spirit John?”

“I’ll explain later,” I heard Ayanna whisper.

I took a deep breath. There was one more thing I had to confess. It pained me to do it, but I knew they’d find out at some point. I had to rip off the bandage and get it over with.

“There’s something else. Cotton… he has the adinkra bracelet.”

Silence. Then:

“He WHAT?!”

“Oh, Tristan. How?!”

“This is bad. THIS IS BAD!”

Everyone started talking at once. A choir of criticism. I held the phone away from my ear and winced. It went about as well as I’d expected. I stood up and turned to Junior, only to see him standing at the far door, a look of confusion on his face as he stared into the next car on the train.

I covered the phone with one hand. “What is it? Breakers?”

He didn’t answer, just stood there, confused, as if unable to process what he was seeing. Everyone on the other end of the phone was still arguing about what to do next, so I walked over to the door and peered through. I had to see this for my—

The phone slipped through my fingers and fell to the floor.

“Tristan?” I heard Ayanna say. “Tristan, what was that? Are you okay?”

I knelt and groped for the phone while keeping my eyes on the window in the door. It was impossible. And yet, everything suddenly made a sickening amount of sense. Cotton had basically told me where he was going, but I didn’t connect the dots until just then.

“Tristan!”

I slowly moved the phone to my ear.

“Ayanna.” “Are you—”

“Ayanna,” I said, slowly and calmly, “I know where the train is heading.”

“You do? Hold on.” She shushed everyone in the background. “Where?”

I licked my lips. The next car wasn't a former passenger car, nor a cargo car, but something I'd seen nearly every day growing up. I'd ridden in one on numerous occasions. By myself. With Eddie. With my parents. Some days it was how I got to school, and other days it was how I got to the gym where Dad and I went for training.

It was an L-train car. And if the spirit train was now disguised as an L, that meant Cotton was headed toward…

"Chicago," I said.

# 27
# BREAKER, BREAKER

**THE INSTANT WE STEPPED INTO THE L TRAIN, I REALIZED MY** mistake.

For the newbies, an L, short for *elevated*, is the opposite of a subway. Instead of traveling underground, L trains ride on tracks high above the streets, rumbling through and around Chicago day and night.

*"Next stop, Oak Park,"* came the automated announcement over the train's public address system.

And, as on all public transportation, there are rules. *Watch your step. Let other passengers off before you get on. Bags don't need to sit in a seat. Don't ride in the trash car when taking the tram into Isihlangu.* You know, the basics. But the one rule I'd forgotten? It went like this:

*Always look around to see who else is in the train car with you.*

Mom drilled that into my head as soon as I was old enough to take the L by myself. I'd hop on the Green Line and ride to Eddie's apartment across town. *Always be aware of your surroundings*, Mom had said. But this time I'd been so distracted with the spirit train's transformation that I hadn't noticed who was waiting for me in the single bucket seat near the middle of the car.

A Redliner sat there, a newspaper in their gloved hands.

*“Next stop, East Garfield Park,”* droned the automated system.

I paused. Maybe the Redliner hadn’t noticed us. I didn’t want to draw any attention before I was sure all the kids had made it safely off the train. Gingerly, I began to retreat, motioning for Junior to do likewise as we tiptoed out the way we’d come.

A chorus of whispers brushed past my ear.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I turned to find a Breaker wedged into corner of the ceiling above the door, like an oversize spider waiting for flies to land in its web. And, in case you haven’t figured it out, we were the flies. The splotchy gray creature’s impossibly wide mouth was open, revealing only coal-black darkness.

And then it shrieked.

“Wuzzuh?” The Redliner jerked upright, fumbling with a cord around their neck. I caught a glimpse of a graying beard before his mask dropped back into place and he stood and pointed at me. “You! You can’t be here.”

I backed away from the Breaker, which peeled itself off the ceiling like molasses dripping out of a jar, its whip-fingers and club-arms grabbing handrails and poles as it maneuvered its way over the seats after me. It moved slowly. Lazily. And yet I knew at any second it could put on a terrifying burst of speed and attack.

It shrieked again. Seconds later, an answering shriek came from the car ahead.

*Dang.*

The Redliner blew three shrill blasts on a whistle and stood in the middle of the aisle, both arms outstretched. “You are not allowed in this space,” he said loudly. “Go away. You can’t be here. You are not allowed in this space.”

He continued to repeat himself as if he were chanting the Mantra of Gentrification, +10 advantage to removing *undesirables.* It would’ve been funny—and sad, let’s not forget sad—if it weren’t for the Breaker skittering toward me. And then there was the small matter of a second Breaker in the next car.

A speaker crackled above me. “Tomothy, what’s going on?”

I recognized the voice on the PA—it was Harold. How could one man always manage to show up at exactly the wrong time? It was like he had a field guide to bigotry.

I scowled and activated the akofena gloves. The Breaker was scuttling back and forth, trying to determine the best way to get at me. The flames of the shadow gloves blazed merrily, but I knew they wouldn't keep the monster at bay forever.

*"Next stop, Shedd Aquarium."*

Tomothy the Redliner didn't move. He just waited for the automated train stop announcement to finish, then shouted, "Got a couple escapees down here, Harold. What do you want me to do?"

"Did you blow your whistle?"

"Yep."

"And did you recite the Discouragement

Chant?" "You betcha."

"And they're still there? Interesting."

Tomothy scratched his head. "One of 'em's a bit weird, if I'm being honest, Harold. All on fire and whatnot."

"What knot?"

"Yep, whatnot. And on fire."

Harold mumbled something off-mic, then came back on full of excitement. "Darla says don't let him past—it's that same troublemaker, the one we've been searching for. Make a citizen's arrest, Tomothy!"

"Now?" Tomothy looked at me, then back at the speaker. "But he's on fire. And one of the Boss Lady's creatures is about to start nibbling on him."

*"Next stop, Chinatown."*

I stiffened. Chinatown was only one stop away from my apartment. I couldn't let the spirit train reach my neighborhood. Not when it was carrying all these Breakers and the Redliners. Unfortunately, both were converging on me at this moment. I licked my lips. Maybe I could dash past Tomothy and figure out a way to stop the train from a different car. I'd just tensed, ready to sprint for the far side of the car, when the door we'd come through hissed open. Baby Lewis stood there, his eyes big and ready to cry.

"Mr. Tristan? I can't find Kweku," he said.

The Breaker turned around.

I could see the events unfolding before they happened, and I was moving before I could talk myself out of it. The shadow gloves disappeared as I dropped and slid beneath the Breaker's gangly limbs, then hopped to

my feet, scooped up Baby Lewis, and took off through the door into the dining car, Junior right on my heels.

More whistle blasts. More shrieks.

Baby Lewis squeaked in fear as the door behind us crashed open. My legs kept pumping as I held him close. “Don’t look back!” I shouted.

The door to the car in front of us was open, and for a second I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to waste precious seconds fiddling with it. The three of us ran through, and then I skidded to a stop, put down Baby Lewis, and gave him a little shove. “Go! Keep running. Get to the next car and lock the door behind you.”

Junior managed to slide shut the door to the dining car. Then he tried to close off the car we were in. But no matter how hard he heaved on the door, it wouldn’t budge.

*“Next stop, Thirty-fifth-Bronzeville.”*

This was it. Home.

More shrieks filled the air as a horde of Breakers flooded the dining car. I tried to help Junior yank on our car’s door. He’d lost a lot of strength after being stuck in a cell for so long. But the latch wouldn’t work. Though the dining car door was closed, I knew the Breakers would soon bust through and swarm us. Dozens upon dozens of the gray monsters were in there, flailing their arms and beating the ground.

The PA system crackled again and, after a burst of static, Harold’s voice came through a speaker in the corner. “Give it up, young men. It’s over. Kindly return to your cells—I mean, your rooms—and don’t make this harder on yourselves.”

I gritted my teeth and let go of the door. I dared a quick glance behind me and saw Baby Lewis running through the next car. There was no one else in sight… but he’d left the door ajar.

“Do you see the Boss Lady’s little friends?” Harold asked, dragging my attention back to the predicament in front of me. He sighed loudly. “Revolting, aren’t they? But we have to work with whoever’s available.”

“You’d rather work with monsters than children?” I asked the disembodied voice.

“Of course not!” he said indignantly. “I’d rather do no such thing. But you’ve proven to be a thorn in the Boss Lady’s side, Mr. Strong. And that’s why this has to end here.”

In the dining car, the Breakers crawled over each other, the tables, and even along the ceiling on their way to us. I started to back up, then stopped. If I let them through, there'd be no stopping the creatures from reaching the kids in the rear of the train.

"Junior," I said quietly. "Close the door."

"Yeah. On it." He started to jog away, then stopped. "Aren't you coming?"

I shook my head. "Go through and lock it from the other side. I'll hold them here."

"But—"

"Just lock it!" I yelled, cutting off his protest just as the PA system crackled again.

"Do you know what these hideous creatures are?" Harold asked.

I didn't answer. My attention didn't waver from one of the larger monsters, with whip-fingers as long as jump ropes. It crept forward, its head tilting in fits and spurts to the left, then back to the right.

"Tristan, come on…" Junior pleaded from the door behind me.

I ignored him. A deafening rush of whispers crowded my ears and I ground my teeth. There was nothing else to do. I lifted my fists and the shadow gloves roared to life, black flames licking up my arms.

"Breakers, my dear boy, were specialists," said Harold. "Back when your people joyously worked for free in exchange for housing—"

"That was slavery!" I shouted.

"—you'd get malcontents like yourself. Ungrateful. Spoiled. Stubborn. Well, there were people you could be sent to. Talented, enterprising folks who believed that if you spared the rod, you spoiled the slave. Breakers would strip that pesky spirit from you in no time flat. You'd learn to appreciate what you had!"

"Strip… the spirit?" High John's prone form slid through my mind. Then Gum Baby's limp body in my backpack. Was that how…?

"Gone!" Harold said cheerfully. "And the same will happen to you if you don't get back where you belong, Mr. Strong. Off to your room!"

The door to the dining car slid open and the large Breaker crept over the gangway connection to my car. I never took my eyes off it. This monstrosity was what had severed a god from his power, ripped the life from a brazen and fearless doll, and terrorized innocent children. Its claw-tipped fingers scraped the floor as it whispered gibberish at me. Horrifying

gibberish that made my knees want to buckle, but still gibberish. Its mouth opened wide, then wider and wider still, and it let out a horrifying shriek that threatened to shatter every window in the car.

How could we win against Cotton if he had allies like this? It was impossible. I already knew what would happen next. The Breakers would overwhelm me, rip any Alkean magic they found from my body, then discard me like an unwanted rag doll. Because to them, and to Cotton, Patty Roller, and the Redliners, anyone different from them who had power of any sort—power of determination, of voice, of unity, and yes, of magic— and didn't immediately roll over and obey their wishes was an Other. And Others couldn't be suffered to exist, let alone thrive, because then what would happen?

(The answer is nothing. Absolutely nothing. You know that, and I know that. But maybe Granny Z had said it best back at the skate park. *It's a sad fact that their abusers are always gonna be afraid that their own sins will be revisited upon them. And fear makes grown folks act like children.*)

So now the children had to act like adults. Such foolishness, man, I tell you. There was a train car full of frightened kids behind me and a mob of monsters in front of me, and the only adults on board hid behind masks and offered thoughts and prayers. That left Junior and myself. Two boys. Three, if you counted Spirit John. I really just wanted to go home. And now I had the chance. But leaving now would mean abandoning the vulnerable, and if I did that, I'd be no better than any Redliner or haint.

Strongs may argue. Strongs might bicker, fuss, and fight like all families do from time to time. But you know what we don't do? Give up.

Strongs.

Keep.

Punching.

The akofena shadow gloves shimmered as black flames roared around them and up my arms. I slammed my right fist into the opposite palm. Once. Twice. I dropped into the boxer's crouch perfected by Walter Strong and grinned at the Breakers.

"What are you doing?" Harold called over the PA system. "Surely you're giving up, right? Boy? Mr. Strong? Hellooo…"

I didn't answer him, because I was done speaking. Time to let my fists do the talking.

The large Breaker shrieked, an ear-piercing signal, and the rest of the gray monsters rushed forward. Whip-claws lashed out, a dozen—no, two dozen at a time, their pointed tips descending through the air like cleavers.

*Snik, snik, snik*

Too many to dodge or duck at once. Slip? No, cross-body block!

My arms crossed in front of me, left over right, at the last moment.

*Snik, snik, snik*

Their attacks were heavy but harmless, bouncing off the shadow gloves. Several Breakers fell back, squealing in pain as black fire crept up their whip-claws. More took their place. Again they attacked.

*Snik, snik, snik*

Once more they were repelled, but the force of their blows was driving me backward. I couldn't retreat far—the door to the next car was behind me. The car with Junior and the rest of the kids. I couldn't let the Breakers get past me. I dug in and inched forward up the aisle.

*Snik, snik, snik*

The power of the Breakers' blows grew stronger. More monsters were joining in the attack, squeezing together and sending out their whip-claws with no pause in between.

*Snik, snik, snik*

They rained blows on me, snarled at me, shrieked at me, roared at me, sent wave after wave after wave of pure hatred and malevolence, and it was all I could do to keep my arms raised and defend myself, because I was so tired, incredibly tired, of defending myself, but it wasn't just me I was defending, now was it? And every time I wanted to drop, say I was too tired, quit, give up, just let them win, I thought of Baby Lewis, of Chayse, of Kweku, of the Rolling Thunder, of every kid in every city of every country who didn't have someone to defend them when they needed it most and I kept. On. Standing.

Even when it hurt to keep my arms raised.

Even when I wanted to cry.

Even when the spirit train shuddered.

Even when I wanted to sink to one knee beneath the onslaught.

Even when the shadow gloves began to flicker like a nearly extinguished torch.

Even when the Breakers shrieked and the train screeched.

Even when silence came and I couldn't tell—through the fog of exhaustion and pain—if I was still conscious, and even when I feared I'd passed out… or worse.

Even when two giant brown hands gripped my arms and, despite the remaining flames, pulled me forward, lifted me, hugged me.

"I'm still standing," I whispered.

"I know," said John Henry. "I know."

"Cotton—" I tried to say, but the giant god cut me off, and his expression was grim.

"Tristan, I reckon we've got ourselves a bit of a

problem." Right. There was always one more fight.

John Henry glanced behind him, and I looked past him to see a huge hole he'd made in the side of the train car. "Look here, Tristan," he said. "Maybe you should… hang on back with the others. Make sure them kids is okay, you know what I mean?"

I stared at him. That was pretty much the same thing I'd told Kweku when I thought it'd be too dangerous for him. So yeah… I knew exactly what he meant. And I didn't like it one bit.

I ducked under his arms, ignoring his protests, and jumped through the hole. Dropped down to the elevated platform, holding on tight to the backpack with Gum Baby still inside. Keelboat Annie stood down the track a ways, five cars ahead. Her keel pole was stuck into the wheels at the front of the train, jamming them. That must've been the shuddering I'd felt.

Twenty or so Redliners were fleeing on the ground below, their cloaks between their legs like the tails of scolded dogs. I watched them run east, toward Lake Michigan.

"Don't worry, Tristan," Keelboat Annie shouted. "Soon as this here pole stops playin', we'll be after them, don't you fret."

But it wasn't the Redliners I was worried about—it was the giant structure they were running toward. I could just make it out in the distance.

No, not a structure.

A monster.

Because, in the shallows of Lake Michigan, near the beach where Dad and Mom would take us, where me and all my friends used to play together in the sand, Old Angola reared its ugly head.

And the spirit prison had grown.

# 28

# CHICAGO OVER EVERYTHING

**LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY NEIGHBORHOOD. BRONZEVILLE, IN** Chicago. Last year my social studies teacher, Mrs. Tracy, gave us an assignment to research the areas we lived in. She was always trying to get us to learn more about the histories around us, and at first I thought it was silly. A street is a street, right?

Wrong.

Let's see what you know.

Did you know that Chicago was once a major trading post for Indigenous peoples, and different tribes traveled along trade routes that eventually became the avenues we ride on today?

Did you know that Chicago was one of several relocation destinations during the infamous Trail of Tears, when those same Indigenous peoples were ejected from their homes across the country by government order?

Did you know that Chicago is one of several midwestern cities, like Detroit and Milwaukee, that received Black people migrating from the South beginning in the early 1900s, looking for jobs, opportunity, a beginning, a restart?

Did you know any of that? I didn't. And do you know what all those people, those Chicagoans, had in common? The journey, the burdens they

carried, and the communities they built when their tired feet and weary souls finally stopped. Those communities still exist today. Communities like Bronzeville, where Alvin Strong and Jessica Strong lived and raised their son, me.

Home.

I lived a few blocks away from the Thirty-Fifth Street station. If I took a left turn instead of a right, I'd be able to see the awning of my apartment building. I was so close and yet so far. Because I couldn't go home now, not with the city in so much trouble. I mean, this was where I lived! Where my friends, neighbors, and even strangers planted roots, where we grew. There was the corner store where Eddie and I snagged Flamin' Hots before huddling at my kitchen table and arguing over comic books. There was the bus stop where I waited before the sun rose. There was the barbershop, G's, where I got my hair cut and learned all the neighborhood gossip. This was home!

And Old Angola loomed over it all.

The air shimmered as the powers of Gye Nyame kicked in, even without the adinkra, just as I'd expected. It seemed like every time I arrived in a new city, the magic of Alke wanted to show me the stories that rippled through it. New Orleans. Vicksburg. Memphis. National City. Now Chicago. And this time the golden threads decided to really show off.

Bronzeville's story was written in the streets, and each step I took sent words racing away from my feet. Bright curling script told of the hopes and dreams of the Black population that had swelled to bursting after the Great Migration. Fragments of song swirled off to frame the former location of the Regal Theater, where the city gathered to watch Black musicians tear down the house.

Rose-gold headlines marched off to queue up in front of the offices of the *Chicago Defender*, the Black newspaper that had played a big part in getting many Black families to the city in the first place, sending newspapers south on trains with tales of opportunity.

The story of my community was written in the footsteps of those who had lived here before me. And now the clawed hand of a haint threatened to erase it all.

"Tristan!"

I didn't know I was walking toward the lakefront until I heard someone shouting my name. Ayanna sprinted after me, and Junior limped close

behind. Thandiwe lent him her shoulder, and Spirit John brought up the rear. We were hurting, broken. But we weren't defeated. Not while we still breathed.

"Are you okay?" Ayanna asked, her eyes searching me for signs of injury.

I nodded, even as Junior thumped me on the shoulder and glared. "Grandstander." Then his eyes softened. "Thanks," he said. "No one's ever really stood up for me like that."

I punched him back. (Hey, it's how we communicate!) "Next time you can be the human punching bag."

"Good. I don't know exactly what you did, but I bet it was stubborn and hardheaded."

I bowed. "Guilty as charged."

"Ha-ha," Ayanna said. "Nyame said the Breakers are heading east, to the lake." She looked worried as she stared past me to where Old Angola lurched in the distance.

Junior studied me. "You know your eyes are golden?" he asked. "Did you ever think about wearing sunglasses for that? It's kinda weird."

I sighed. "It's from Nyame's power, and… You know what? I'm so glad you're back."

"And you're still sort of on fire," he went on. "Tiny flames, just there, on your eyebrows. Is that normal?"

Before I could put him in a headlock, a bellow shook the area. Spouts of steam erupted near the shore, and we all watched grimly as Old Angola continued to grow. It had been the size of a train station before, and now it was as tall as a ten-story apartment building.

I took a few steps forward, then looked back to see the four others following me.

"Well?" Ayanna asked. "What're you waiting on?"

"Weren't you going to try and stop me? Talk me out of rushing in?" "Would you listen?" Thandiwe asked. "No."

Ayanna raised her hands as if to say *Well, there you have it*. "I'm done arguing with your big head. I'm saving my energy. Growing as a person."

I shook my head. "There was an insult in there somewhere."

"I'm gonna put in another if you don't get going. Wasting all this time." I took another step, then turned. "Thank you," I said quietly.

Junior looked back and forth between Ayanna and me and finally asked Thandiwe, “Are they… ?” He waggled his eyebrows so hard he looked absolutely ridiculous. The princess winked at him, and Junior nodded. “Got it. About time.”

“Hey!” I shouted, but Ayanna grabbed me by the arm and started marching me toward the lake.

“Let’s go, superhero.”

Chicago never did know how to act in the summer. That’s one of the reasons I love it. On a normal day in the middle of August, the lakefront would be packed. I remember Dad trying to get us out the apartment at like five in the morning just so we could get a parking spot and claim our little oasis in the sand. By noon *everyone* would be out there—teens in cars with music pumping from their speakers, college students getting in one last break before they returned to whatever super studying college kids did, and even grown folks trying to catch a breath in between the pressures of humidity and life. Everybody was looking to have a good time, screaming and shouting and laughing.

Today there was only screaming and shouting, and they weren’t happy sounds.

People lined the sidewalks and crowded the balconies and fire escapes along Oakland Avenue. Phones were out and recording, and as we—a squad of four kids and a spirit—headed down the street toward the green-soaked entrance to the Thirty-Fifth Street pedestrian bridge, I desperately wished Anansi was with us, too. He would know the right thing to say. Break the tension with a joke, maybe, or give us a word of warning. But he was still missing. I glanced at Junior, who limped along gamely, his hand on his sling pack, a smile quirked on his lips. He looked so much like his father right then.

A giggle broke through my thoughts. We all looked at Ayanna, who waved her hand in apology before a fresh peal of laughter escaped her lips.

“Walking toward monsters tickles you?” I asked. We slipped around a knot of children pointing at Old Angola, but with wonder, not terror. A group of adults—their parents, maybe—clustered nearby in front of a barbecue take-out joint, whispering and looking around nervously.

Ayanna shook her head. “No, it’s just… you’re always fighting your big final boss fight on a beach. And you’re always complaining about getting

wet, so I thought you might want to duck into there and get prepared." She giggled again as she pointed to a little pop-up store that had taken over an empty building. That happened a lot—sometimes it'd be an art gallery, or a fashion show, and other times it was a music-video shoot. This time it was a…

"'Beach bargains,'" I read aloud. A mannequin in neon-blue flippers, tie-dyed swim trunks, arm floats, and a mask and snorkel posed in the store window. I looked at Ayanna, who was doing her best to contain a fresh spurt of chuckling. "You want me to go to war with haints and monsters with arm floats."

Ayanna doubled over and burst into guffaws. After a second, Thandiwe chuckled, Junior grinned, and I shook my head and smiled. Ayanna leaned against Thandiwe, who patted her back sympathetically as she gulped down air. Within a few moments she stood upright and wiped tears from her eyes. It looked like she was going to be fine until Junior squinted and said, "Maybe Breakers hate swim noodles."

The image of Junior chasing after one of the gray monsters with a red Styrofoam pool toy forced a snicker to escape from my lips, and then we were all cracking up.

A couple walked by quickly, staring at us and sucking their teeth. "Poor things," I heard the woman mutter. "They're terrified."

I finally started walking again, and everyone joined me. Our smiles faded as we moved closer to the bridge. "Do you think this is the final battle?" I asked.

Ayanna looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, is this it? If…*when* we beat Cotton, will that be the end? Or is something else going to come looking for a fight? Isn't that how it works? There's always another fight."

No one answered, and I stopped as we reached the last cross street before the entrance to the pedestrian bridge. A line of trees, part of the park surrounding the beach, blocked the waterline, but Old Angola towered over everything. From here I could make out the additions to it, even without the spirit vision. More steel doors dotted its frame, like soul-stripping freckles. But a drawbridge, partially raised, now protruded from one of the monster's legs. A dark gated entrance waited at the end of the rotted wooden access way. I swallowed. The edges of the darkness shimmered, like heat coming up from concrete.

*Click*

Just then my spirit vision engaged. I guess because I'd stared at the weird energy leaking from the entrance for too long. That's what that shimmering was—energy. But now I could see even more spectral details, like the haintacles swarming up and down the lake, flailing and thrashing.

I took a deep breath. "Final battle or not, if any of

you—" "STOP RIGHT THERE!"

A miffed voice shouted at us from across the street. I groaned as a familiar Redliner holding a bullhorn marched down the sidewalk opposite us. Harold. Darla and others followed him, but it was a much smaller group than the one that had attacked Granny Z's skate-park refuge. They brandished signs with silly slogans like DO YOU BELONG? and 2, 4, 6, 8, EVERYONE DISCRIMINATES. Harold held up his bullhorn, flinched at its squeal, then pointed at me. "THAT'S FAR ENOUGH."

I threw up my hands. "Don't you have a job or something?"

"DON'T YOU?" he shouted.

"No! I'm twelve!"

Harold laughed. "DO I LOOK LIKE A

DOOFUS?" We all side-eyed each other.

"HEY! THAT'S NOT FUNNY! DON'T MAKE ME PERFORM ANOTHER CITIZEN'S ARREST."

Thandiwe stepped forward, her kierie pointed at them. "Why are you so concerned with where people go? Don't you realize you're working for a monster?"

"First of all," Darla said, her hands on her hips, "we're not working for anyone. This is a volunteer group, and we're protecting our safety."

"By making everyone else unsafe?" Junior called. "Yeah, right."

A crowd of onlookers was starting to form. I saw some faces I knew— kids from the Rolling Thunder, kids from my neighborhood, people who worked around the block.

"Tristan, look," Ayanna whispered in warning.

Gray shadows flitted in the trees beyond the bridge. Breakers!

I approached Harold and Darla. It was time to end this.

"We're done letting you tell us where we can and can't be. I'm going to that beach, and my friends are coming along with me."

Darla snatched the bullhorn from Harold and stabbed a finger at me. "YOU WILL DO NO SUCH THING. THERE WILL BE NONE OF

THAT… THAT…*BEHAVIOR* ON OUR

LAKEFRONT.” “You don’t even live here!”

“THAT’S NOT THE POINT!” she shouted. “YOU WILL SCARE AWAY THE PEACEFUL CITIZENS WHO JUST WANT TO ENJOY THEMSELVES.”

My jaw dropped open. There was a monster growing ten feet wider and taller every minute right behind them!

A hand settled on my arm. “It’s not worth it,” Ayanna said.

“But…” I sighed. “They’re so annoying.”

The crowd behind us started getting angry, and they were on our side. Store owners and neighborhood folks began to flood the street, yelling and shaking fists, flip-flops, and even a grill spatula at the Redliners.

“Y’all leave them kids alone!”

“Who do you think you are, coming up in our neighborhood saying who can go where?”

“And wearing masks. Scared to show your face,

Joe?” “Kids, y’all go ahead and have fun.”

I started walking forward, and Ayanna, Thandiwe, Junior, and Spirit John followed. Harold and Darla and the smattering of other Redliners held their line as we approached, brandishing their signs like bats, but when the entire community moved with us, their resolve broke and the masked cowards scampered back across the bridge. The trees rustled as the Breakers followed them.

The two groups may have been deterred, but they weren’t defeated. Not yet. I planned on taking care of that real soon. First, though, there was something else I had to do.

I stopped just in front of the bridge and turned to Spirit John. The ghostly boy had a determined look on his face, but it changed to surprise when I shook my head at him.

“This is as far as you go,” I said. “If Cotton or Old Angola get ahold of you, you’re done for. That monster will devour you, and I’m not gonna lose you again.”

The spirit looked toward the beach, then back at me, clearly frustrated. “I know,” I said. “But remember what your uncle told you? This isn’t your fight. Let me—let *us*—fight for you. We’ve got this.”

I wasn’t sure this would work, but I took off High John’s root pouch and looped it over Spirit John’s head. When it touched him, while I still held on

to the cord, the pouch rippled and turned semitransparent. I let go and it appeared on his neck in a matching ghostly hue. Like it was where it belonged.

"If something happens to us—" I started to say, but Spirit John held up a fist, cutting me off. I dapped him up (*that* was a weird sensation) and he smiled sadly. Then he nodded at the bridge as if to say *Go on.*

"Yeah," I said. I took a few steps, then looked back. The last I saw of Spirit John, he had his face turned up to the sky and his hands in his pockets. A flash of light rippled in the air, and he was gone.

I caught up with my friends and we crossed the bridge, our shoes slapping against the pavement. We cut through a park, dodging benches and the spectators who were gawking at Old Angola or the retreating Redliners or both. Finally we reached Oakwood Beach, and there I stopped so suddenly that the other three collided into my back, sending us all sprawling into the sand.

"Ow! What'd you do that for?" Junior complained.

I didn't answer.

"Seriously, you need to work on your communication skills," he said.

I got to my feet, still silent. I could feel Junior glaring at me, but my eyes were elsewhere.

"See? Right now, you're not even apologizing. It's that sort of—"

Thandiwe clamped a hand over his mouth and pointed to the scene in front of us.

Old Angola stood ten times as tall as it had back in Louisiana, and five times as wide. Rows and rows of steel doors lined its cinder-block structure, with no way to access them from the outside. I shuddered, thinking about how the haunted prison plantation captured its victims. The haintacles were dormant now, but at any moment they could lash out. And all that paled in comparison to what was unfolding in the shallows.

Patty Roller and Twennymiles stood surrounded by a collection of Redliners and Breakers. Both haints glared at me as the Breakers' shrieks cut through the thunder of the waves beating the shore. No one moved, though, even as I took a cautious step forward.

Because they were waiting for someone else.

Cotton descended from Old Angola's lowered drawbridge like a conquering tyrant surveying his newly won territory. He was barefoot, and thorny vines covered his legs and arms. A simple white button-down shirt

with rolled-up sleeves and linen pants completed his look… except for the haintacles that extended from the prison monster and wound around his waist. His eyes smoked and flashed red, while his arms bulged as Old Angola pumped him full of power. The haint stepped onto the beach, spread his arms wide, and shouted so that everyone on the beach could hear.

“Tristan Strong! Welcome.” He smiled and extended the back of his hand to me. “Come greet your king.”

# 29
# BEACHFRONT BREAKER HUNT

***HE WAS NOTHING BUT A***

*Plain black boy.*

Someone had painted part of a poem on a line of boulders that stretched along the shore. I knew that poem. It was by Gwendolyn Brooks, and my ELA teacher last year, Mrs. Drummond, had taught it and others from a book called *A Street in Bronzeville*. Yeah, that's right, like my neighborhood. Mrs. Drummond spoke about the poems the same way she talked about the city of Chicago—with reverence. She wasn't just my teacher, she was also a poet who'd written several books of her own, and she loved the idea of the stories inside our cities. The narratives they told. History etched into the bones our communities were built on.

History.

Hidden stories.

And what was a hidden story but a job for an Anansesem?

Cotton strolled up the sand until he stood a few yards away from me. He looked amused as the four of us lined up to face him. "What's this?" he asked. "A welcome party? Shoot, Tristan, you didn't have to go that far."

My fingers trembled. It was his mocking tone that infuriated me. And the cocky smile, one side of his face writhing as he bared too-sharp teeth.

And the way he had so little regard for whoever he hurt, whoever he trampled, whoever he dismissed on his way to acquire more power. My jaw clenched, and every muscle in my body turned into granite. Loud roaring filled my ears, like the waves on the shore but angrier, and I could feel my skin growing hot, as if any second now I would burst into—

A hand settled on my wrist. It was cool, calming. Ayanna moved next to me and—ignoring Cotton—tapped my chest with her other hand. *Control*.

I took a deep breath and nodded to let her know I understood. Losing my grip on my anger wouldn't help us. I had to control it. I looked at Cotton while pointing at Old Angola. "You're finished. It's over."

Cotton—did a flash of anger cross his face when I didn't erupt in fury? —chuckled. "Finished? Boy, I ain't even got started yet. And you ain't got enough years under your belt to be telling me anything. Come on, big guy. What is this supposed to be, really? A show of strength? Tristan, I *am* strength! Look! I done brought a piece of home for you to enjoy, and you shove it back in my face like that? That ain't right, son."

A crowd was beginning to form along the beach and on the bridge. A lot of the kids from the neighborhood were getting a closer look at what had landed in their backyard.

"What do you mean 'a piece of home'?" I asked. I had to figure out Cotton's plan. There was something I wasn't seeing, a trick up his thorny sleeves.

All traces of amusement disappeared from the haint's face. "Home, Tristan. The seat of power. Where you and I can rule this country from! Think about it… your power and mine, combined. We can shape this world the way we see fit."

"I would never join you," I spat. "In anything."

"Aw, come on, don't be like that. We're similar, you

and I." "I'm nothing like you!"

"Look at you—anger just boiling outta your pores. Itchin' to make a change. Well, so am I!"

I ground my teeth, and only Ayanna's hand on my arm kept me from flipping out right then and there. "No, you don't want power. You want power *over* others. You want control *over* the rest of the world. You want worship, and you don't care who you destroy to get it. You're nothing but a greedy ghost of a bully, and it's time you got locked up in your bottle again."

Cotton laughed. Actually laughed, clutching his belly and throwing his head back so far his hat nearly fell off. “And what’s that gonna do? Somebody will just break it open, someone who don’t care about what little rituals was brought over by your people to catch my people. Naw, my boy, I’m here to stay. And you? I told you before, the world don’t care about you! Running ’round trying to save everything, do everything, be everything to everyone, and all you got is some dead friends and a doll! Looking for some stories. You think the world cares about your stories? From what I heard tell, you ain’t even a Anansesem anymore, and Anansi abandoned you. So why do you care about a few dusty old tales that don’t impress nobody?”

I flinched. Thandiwe inhaled and Junior whirled to face me.

“Is that true?” he asked.

I hesitated, then nodded.

Cotton laughed again. “See? Your gods don’t have faith in you, and your friends shouldn’t either, since all you do is get them caught or killed. You bury that little doll yet? You all alone, boy.” His face twisted into an angry scowl as he stomped back and forth in front of us. A swell of noise rose behind me. I risked a glance back to see more people gathering.

Cotton stopped and glared at them. “You still running ’round trying to save a world that left you behind. A world that don’t care if you go missing! You see any of these folks rushing down here to help? They don’t care! Just a bunch of vultures here for the show.”

“That’s a lie!” I said. *Right?*

“Then why haven’t you heard of any of the history you done dug up? Hmm? Because nobody cares, that’s why! Bury it and build over it, that’s the move.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” I shouted.

But his words ate at me. The slave trading in New Orleans. The plantation that was turned into a prison. The riots in Memphis and National City. Was it true no one cared? Why didn’t everyone shout about these stories in school, or turn victories into holidays, or put them on T-shirts and sing about them in songs or make movies about them? Was that history not important enough?

Ayanna let go of my arm and stepped forward. Her eyes narrowed as she stared at Cotton. She looked him up and down, her lips pursed.

Cotton eyed her back. “You got a question, darling?”

She sniffed. “More of a comment.” She turned to me. “He’s stalling.” Cotton stiffened.

I frowned, then looked around. Hundreds of people were gathered on the lakefront now. A few adults, but mostly teens and children. Kids from the community who were curious, kids from the spirit train who’d followed us. A whole beach crowded with young people.

I froze.

*Where were the Breakers?*

I spun around and shoved Ayanna aside just as Cotton lunged forward, just as screams ripped through the crowd of kids behind us, and just as hundreds of haintacles erupted from every steel door on Old Angola.

The beach exploded into chaos. Children ran screaming left and right as Cotton stalked us across the sand. He didn’t run, didn’t even seem to be in a hurry as he chewed up chunks of ground with his long strides. He was propelled by the haintacles wrapped around his waist, and he laughed uproariously as the rest of the prison plantation’s appendages terrorized everyone else.

And don’t get it twisted—we tried to fight back. Junior, aka Stone Thrower, zipped gold-flecked rocks at Cotton’s head, one after the other, but the haintacles just batted them away. Ayanna danced in and out with her bat twirling in a golden blur, while Thandiwe dipped and spun with her makeshift kierie and forebear shield.

Cotton chuckled as the two didn’t even come close to hitting him. “Now, now, little ladies, don’t mess up your hair.”

And me? I tried to call upon the akofena shadow gloves, but there were too many people around. Every time the black flames flickered to life, I either had to extinguish them or risk burning a child who was running past in terror. So I swallowed my anger as best I could and ushered children to the exits as we fled the haint.

“Go, go!” I shouted to a group of nine- or ten-year-olds huddling behind a giant sandcastle. I pulled them up and pushed them toward one of the beach access points farthest away from Old Angola. The plantation prison lashed the water and churned the sand like the twisted offspring of a haunted house and a kraken.

*WHUMPH!*

The sandcastle disintegrated as Cotton crashed through it, his eyes wild with hate and the writhing haintacles driving him forward at lightning

speed.

“Get over here, boy,” he spat as he clawed for my hands. I remembered how his thorns had once latched on to me, and I threw myself backward… leaving Junior in front.

Cotton snarled in anticipation. “Fine, I’ll just take another one of your friends!”

The ground trembled.

Sand rattled and bounced around. The sandcastle, now just an unrecognizable mound, flattened completely. Even the lake seemed to withdraw as a long shadow fell across the beachfront and a giant hand reached down to block Cotton’s path.

“I reckon it might be time for you to leave our children alone. Seems you need a playmate your own size.” That rumbling voice. It thrummed, quiet and powerful, but there was a hint of anger lurking inside, too. A promise of retribution, of a bent back straightening, of a proud chin rising, of a people’s strength surging.

John Henry stepped in between us and Cotton.

“Come on, then, and tussle with grown folk.”

The big man and the haint stared at each other across the sand. John Henry’s arms were crossed over his chest, his feet planted solidly in the sand, and from where I scrambled up it looked like he was anchored to the earth itself, a giant carved out of stone.

Cotton sneered. The corners of his eyes smoldered and the haintacles thrashed. “Another story god, fresh for harvesting. Fatted calf and whatnot.”

I grabbed Junior and pulled him out of harm’s way. He looked shell-shocked and exhausted. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Still a bit weak… from being stuck in that cell… I guess. Don’t… want to go back.”

His breath was coming in hitches, like when you run a race and get a cramp in your side. He jerked his head toward the standoff. “What do we do?”

I bit my lip. “Let’s get the rest of the kids off the beach and to safety.”

Ayanna and Thandiwe ran over to us, both panting. Thandiwe was clutching her left arm, but she refused our attempts to examine her. Instead, she pointed at John Henry.

“We’ve got to do something. He’s going to get hurt!”

“He can handle hims—” Ayanna started to say, but Thandiwe shook her head and looked at me, her eyes wide as if begging me to understand something.

“No, he *can’t*. It’s going to happen all over again, and then that haint will grow even stronger.”

It took a second before realization struck. “You mean like High John.” She nodded. “Where are the Breakers?” she asked breathlessly. “I don’t know, and that worries me. Come on.”

We started to search the beach, but Junior jerked suddenly, and I thought he’d had a spasm of pain. “Look!” he cried.

John Henry had unfolded his arms, while Cotton sank into a crouch, like some sort of feral beast—a jackal and snake combined into one. For several seconds nothing happened. The world went still. The clouds paused, the waves froze, and the breeze disappeared, as if everything in sight were holding its collective breath.

And then it exhaled.

Cotton snarled as a haintacle shot out, intent on lassoing the big man’s neck. But John Henry just plucked the wriggling ghost appendage out of the air and squeezed it with one hand. Another haintacle shot out, and another, but again John Henry snagged them. He gripped them, lifted one foot, and then exploded into motion, charging Cotton like a linebacker and planting a shoulder squarely in the haint’s chest. Cotton flew back a dozen yards— through the air!—before landing and skipping across the sand like a stone across a pond.

We opened our mouths to cheer, but Cotton was up again before we could make a sound. He stamped his feet while shrieking like a wild animal in pain, then charged. More haintacles joined him, rushing forward to lash at John Henry. The big man batted them aside, but still more attacked. They snaked in and out and around one another, twisting and turning to find an opening. John Henry dodged the first wave, snagged several in the second, but missed a few that slithered around his legs and tried to upend him. He roared a challenge. Both of his hands squeezed, rotated, and pulled. Cotton’s sneer faded into disbelief as John Henry began to haul in the haintacles like ship’s ropes and drag Old Angola toward him. One step. Two.

Loud groans filled the air. The plantation prison trembled in the shallows as clouds of dust billowed from its seams. Could he do it? Could John Henry really pull—

Cotton slammed into the folk hero's knees. John Henry's legs buckled, and for a brief moment, he teetered off-balance. More haintacles shot out, ready to wrap around him and drag him away.

"Too many," I whispered.

"What?" Junior looked at me.

"There's too many. John Henry will be—"

Twin shadows streaked across the beach, followed by a flare of scorching light. Vortex winds blasted sand everywhere, and the haintacles recoiled. The screaming, whistling sound of something flying at high speed through the air pierced our ears.

"The Flying Ladies!" Ayanna shouted. "And—"

Black wings unfolded. Golden eyes glared.

Miss Sarah, Miss Rose, and Nyame landed next to John Henry.

"Um…" Thandiwe pointed toward the trees near the beach entrance, where clouds of fog began wafting out from between the leaves. I narrowed my eyes. This was familiar. More and more fog filled the air until we couldn't see the trees at all. Booming laughter rolled through the air.

The *River Queen* emerged from the fog, the mermaid carvings screaming war cries as the vessel chugged down the sand on a carpet of mist. Mami Wata stood at the prow. Her hair billowed behind her, and both of her arms stretched out on either side. Keelboat Annie stood next to her, and it was her laugh that continued to shake the air. The *River Queen* skidded into the shallows as the mermaids glared at Cotton and Old Angola, while Annie and Mami Wata leaped over the side to join the other gods on the beach.

"Kids, get on the boat, now!" Mami Wata shouted.

"But—" I said.

"NOW!" Annie and Mami Wata and Miss Sarah and Miss Rose and Nyame all shouted simultaneously.

Well, if they were going to be rude about it…

"They're all here!" Ayanna said as we climbed into the *River Queen*. She looked at me with relief in her eyes. "Together, they might have a chance."

I wanted to believe that. I truly did. But Old Angola kept growing, cinder block by moldy cinder block. More and more haintacles continued to pop out of its seams. And Cotton didn't seem fazed at all as the Alkean gods gathered around him in a semicircle. In fact, he seemed to relish the sight.

"Oh, it's a party!" he said, cackling as he stood with his hands on his hips. "Y'all jumped-up joketales think you can take down the king? Come on, then! One at a time, all at once, don't matter to me one bit."

"Why is he so confident?" I asked myself.

Junior must've thought I was talking to him, because he shrugged. "Does it matter? He can't beat them. Not on his own."

I watched Cotton retreat a bit, moving closer to the shallows. All the gods followed him, trying to keep him boxed in. Smart, except…

*Not on his own.*

Cotton retreated farther.

*They're all here.*

"It's a trap…" I said slowly.

Everyone turned to look at me. Thandiwe, Ayanna, and Junior looked at me as if I'd suddenly started speaking pig latin. And look, if I planned on becoming an expert in any language, it would be pig latin. But at the moment I had to warn everyone.

"It's a trap!" I shouted.

"Tristan?" Ayanna said.

I started to run toward the edge of the steamboat, but Junior was leaning on me, so I could only hobble. "Cotton wants them all together. The Breakers are nearby, just waiting to ambush them like they did High John. JOHN HENRY!" I shouted, trying to get their attention. "IT'S A TRAP!"

But it was too late.

The shallows exploded in a spray as Twennymiles surged out, Patty Roller on his back. Behind him—both in the water and emerging from Old Angola's main entrance—raced hundreds of Breakers. The gray monsters shrieked as they followed the two haints to their next targets: the gods of Alke.

# 30
# A NEW CHALLENGER HAS ENTERED

**GODS AND MONSTERS FOUGHT ON THE SHORES OF LAKE MICHIGAN**.

They all moved so fast, I could hardly keep track of the action, even from our vantage point on the *River Queen*. John Henry tangled with haintacles in his arms while fending off sneak attacks from others. Keelboat Annie bellowed challenges as she came to his aid, swinging her massive keel pole. Miss Sarah and Miss Rose whirled in twin cyclones of feathers and fury, whipping across the beach as they grappled with Breakers. Nyame and Mami Wata fought as a team as well, the goddess raising wave after wave to crash down on the beach, the sky god sending flares of light that stabbed through the water droplets in spears of red, blue, and yellow.

Have you ever been whupped by a rainbow? It looked like it hurt.

And yet it didn't seem that it was going to be enough. Old Angola continued to disgorge Breakers, shrieking and slavering mindless beasts intent on ripping the magic and spirit from us all. Patty Roller stirred the ones around her into a furious horde, Twennymiles carrying her around the battlefield in giant leaps.

And then there was Cotton.

The haint was unstoppable. Too quick, too strong. Old Angola poured more and more power into him, the haintacles wriggling beneath his shirt and slinking around his arms and legs until it was impossible to tell where haint ended and the plantation prison began. His laughter cut through the air like a rusty machete.

"Ha-haaaaaa," he cackled, spinning beneath one of John Henry's attacks as he threw sand into the giant folk hero's eyes. "Is that all you got, big guy? All y'all fighting and you haven't made up a lick of ground. Tire yourselves out, my babies. My Breakers will harvest all that strength and feed it to my pet."

Old Angola shivered and rumbled in the shallows as if agreeing with the haint. I couldn't take my eyes off it, even as the battle raged beneath us. My friends shouted warnings and pointed at different sections of the beach, but my gaze stayed fixed on the monstrosity that was growing ever larger and would eventually swallow us all, imprisoning us with nothing but cement and shadows for company.

"Watch it!" Ayanna screamed as a haintacle tried to yank Miss Rose out of the air.

A Breaker leaped at Keelboat Annie's unprotected back…

… only to fall to the sand in a heap under a barrage of stones. Annie turned, saw that the threat had been dealt with, and waved her keel pole gratefully at Junior before returning to deal with another batch of shrieking gray monsters.

But I glimpsed all this out of the corner of my eye. Something was happening behind Old Angola. A disturbance on the horizon. It looked… familiar.

"Tristan, watch out!"

Junior yanked on my hoodie, sending me sprawling to the deck just in time to avoid a flailing Breaker as it hurtled overhead. He grabbed my arm and helped me back up. "Now isn't the time to be daydreaming!" he shouted. "The gods're in trouble."

I stared at him. Junior limped back to the railing next to Ayanna and Thandiwe, all three of them leaning over to see better. Old Angola rumbled again, and the entire beach shook. The *River Queen* shifted slightly, and Junior slammed his hands against the wood and turned.

"That's it," he said. "I'm going to help. I can't just stand here and do nothing."

Thandiwe nodded and hefted her shield. “Me too.”

The two headed toward the ladder and Ayanna started to follow. “Come on, Tristan,” she said as she passed me.

I licked my lips, peered at the horizon to make sure I wasn’t seeing things, and looked back at my friends. I could feel the weight of Gum Baby in my backpack as I shook my head. “No.”

They all stopped and whirled around in shock. I winced at their looks of betrayal, hurt, and even anger, but I didn’t budge.

“No?” Junior repeated.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Junior poked me in the chest. “You’re the one who dragged us on this road.”

“I know,” I said softly.

“Whole time fussing and yelling about we need to get after Cotton, and now we’re here you’re too scared to fight?”

“That’s not it!”

Ayanna looked back and forth between us. “Tristan, we need you. Don’t do this.”

I shook my head. “No. This isn’t how we win.”

Junior threw up his hands. “Not fighting is how we lose!”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t fight—I’m saying we’re fighting the wrong thing!” I nodded at Old Angola. “*That’s* what we need to stop. Even if we manage to beat Cotton, that thing will still be there feasting on everyone who’s too tired to continue. Look!”

I pointed to the beach. John Henry and Annie were back-to-back, surrounded by haintacles that tried to batter down the two pillars of strength. Miss Sarah and Miss Rose no longer flew as fast or as high. Even Nyame’s gleaming rays seemed duller now.

“They’re losing,” I said softly.

“All the more reason to help them,” Ayanna said. She grabbed my arm. “We can make a difference.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, and I put my hand over hers while looking at Thandiwe and Junior. “But hear me out. No, listen! Someone once told me that it wasn’t my job to get sucked into every skirmish in the war against evil, but to fight the battle that will turn the tide. Old Angola is that battle. We can chase Cotton all over the beach, all over the country, all over the

world, but if we don't stop the monster that's giving him power, we're right back at square one! So that's where I'm going."

Junior glared at me. "Who told you that mess?"

I swung one leg over the railing to the ladder and began climbing down to the sand. "Somebody I should've been listening to for a while now."

Thandiwe looked over the edge at me, then at the raging battle. "But how are you going to get there undetected?"

"No one's going to be looking at me. They'll be

distracted." "By who?" Junior scoffed.

"Them," I said, and I turned and pointed toward the lake, behind the monstrous plantation prison, where the smudge on the sky had grown bigger and darker, taking the shape of a bird. A giant bird, on whose back I'd flown before.

Old Familiar.

The giant shadow crow soared toward us, no longer injured, his wingspan still as wide as a jet's. Three familiar figures stood in a line on his back. For a moment I thought there were four, but it must've been a trick of my eyes, a cloud of feathers or something. I didn't get a chance to linger on the thought, because the person in front yelled to me as the crow landed.

"Sorry it took me so long!" the man said. "Had to convince some friends to fight." He rubbed his head ruefully. "With me, not against me."

The other two figures jumped down, and I smiled at the familiar duo being back together again.

Bear and Brer.

And—

"Dad?" Junior whispered.

Anansi had entered the fray.

The spider, the rabbit, and the bear stood together and faced down the haint. Everyone was focused on the newcomers. Even my friends. Junior stared at his father with a fierce gaze that alternated between pride and anger. Thandiwe and Ayanna studied the sudden lull in the fighting, whispering to each other about strategy and planning a surprise

raft attack. And me?

I dropped to the sand with a quiet *whumph,* then took off. They didn't need to come with me. Too many of my friends had already gotten hurt

doing that. And this next part was probably going to be the most ridiculous, wild, reckless, and dangerous thing I'd ever done.

I headed for Old Angola.

No one paid me any attention. Why would they? Two of the best-known folk heroes and a West African god had joined the other deities of a destroyed world. Together they stood in direct challenge to a haint who wanted their power.

Bear's fur—brown and graying at the tips—was still patchy in spots where he'd worn the iron-monster armor back in Alke. He didn't carry a weapon, but his claws were as long as knives, and he held his massive paws away from his body, ready to strike. Judging from the low growl rumbling deep in his chest, it sounded like Bear was seconds away from doing so. He had a score to settle with Cotton, who had poisoned his mind with hatred.

I didn't know what to make of Brer—I'd never technically met him. Anansi had impersonated him back in Alke. Apparently, he'd mimicked the battle-scarred rabbit's mannerisms perfectly, even fooling his longtime friends, but I had no frame of reference. This Brer had a wild look in his eye—dangerous, reckless. I liked him already.

And then there was the trickster god himself. He'd appeared in his completely human form, without spider legs, and gone were his graphic T-shirt and carefree attitude. This Anansi wore a tailored navy suit, a white button-up shirt with no tie, pants that stopped just above the ankle, and shiny black loafers with golden buckles. His hands were in his pockets as he strolled to the middle of the battlefield, seeming completely oblivious to the Breakers and haintacles gathering around. Brer and Bear followed, and all eyes were on the trio.

I waded into the shallows, trying to make as little noise as possible. Old Angola lurked just ahead, looking even more disgusting and depressing than before. It shuddered, and another rusted steel door appeared halfway up its side. The door clanged open, and a haintacle slithered out.

I froze.

The snakelike tip wavered in the air. For a brief moment, it swayed in my direction. Was my mission over before it had even started?

One second passed. Then another. I held my breath.

The haintacle shivered, like a rattlesnake's tail on mute, and wriggled down the side of the prison toward me. I bit my lip, hesitant to bring out the shadow gloves. They would be like a flare, letting everyone know where I

was. Still the haintacle moved closer. If I did nothing, it would wrap me up and drag me behind that door, never to be seen again. I wanted to get inside, but not like that. It moved closer. And closer. And—

"WHERE'S THAT RAGGEDY EXCUSE FOR A GHOST?"

Anansi's voice boomed over the beach. The haintacle paused, twisted away from me, then shot out to join the others. I let out a sigh of relief. For once I was thankful for the trickster god's big mouth.

Cotton, haintacles now sprouting from his back like poison roots, shouldered his way through the horde of Breakers spread out across the sand. He sneered. "Now, ain't that something? Looks like the petting zoo has arrived. And here I am fresh outta carrots. Guess I'll just have to—"

The haint paused in confusion. Anansi had never stopped. Instead, he continued to walk past Cotton as if the haint wasn't even there. The Breakers, following Cotton's lead, looked around but parted to allow Anansi to keep on walking. We all watched him head directly for Patty Roller, who was still sitting atop Twennymiles. The trickster god stared up at her, and I could hear his words from where I hid twenty yards away.

"You're the one who took my son," he said.

Patty Roller sniffed and refused to meet his eyes. "Your *son* needs better manners. Teaching to learn his place. Once this infernal magic is stripped from their feeble frames, the education will commence for him and the others. After we do away with your meddling."

To my surprise, Anansi nodded. "Funny thing is, I agree. I haven't been the best teacher. Not to him, not to anyone. But I'll be a five-legged arachnid before I let you scar another kid."

Patty Roller leaned over and laughed. "And who, pray tell, will stop me? You?"

Anansi kept looking at her, but his voice grew louder. "Everybody's got their role to play."

Was he talking to me? I couldn't help but feel that way. It was all the encouragement I needed. The ramp leading into Old Angola was *right there.* I was so close, and all the Breakers were on the beach. The haintacles were busy, too, either reinforcing Cotton or wriggling around the other Alkean forces.

"Unfortunately, I won't have the honor of showing you the error of your ways," Anansi continued. There was something in his voice, a playful note

that made me pause with one foot on the ramp and look back. “That privilege goes to an old friend.”

And Old Familiar let out a harsh caw that rang to the sky. I squinted. There *had been* someone else on his back. She’d been sitting. Not hiding, but preparing. And now she slid down off the shadow crow and dropped to the sand, wearing her purple-and-green jogging suit and holding a cane in one hand. I winced. I didn’t envy Patty Roller.

“Here she is!” Granny Z shouted. She marched across the sand, shaking her cane at Patty Roller and Twennymiles. “Here she is! You see? The no-good, child-stealing, lying, cheating, fake-crying duchess of destruction. Erzulie, you see? Here she is!”

Patty Roller scoffed. “Who is this old—”

And then she stopped. Patty Roller opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again. Nothing came out. She couldn’t speak! The ground beneath her began to shake. Twennymiles tried to rear, but the horse’s hooves had become stuck in the sand. No, they were sinking!

“The Erzulie been watching,” Granny Z said, her cane pointing at the haints like a judge’s gavel. Even Cotton looked wary of her, and the Breakers and haintacles cleared a circle around the doomed duo. I shook my head. Cotton didn’t care about anyone, even those on his own side.

“The Erzulie been watching! Erzulie Dantor says the children are under *her* protection. No one harms them and sleeps soundly. No one threatens them and lives peacefully.” Granny Z spun in a slow circle, daring anyone to challenge her claims. Nobody did. “She says no one brings suffering to *her* children and walks the streets without fear.”

Sand crept up Twennymiles’s legs and swept around Patty Roller in fierce blasts. It scoured and scuffed them, ripping away the wilted flowers in a storm of dead petals. Again the ground rumbled, and more sand showered Patty Roller, knocking her hair—a wig?—askew and sending her reeling. She tried to scream, clawing at her throat, but not a peep could be heard.

“The Erzulie been watching!”

Patty Roller and Twennymiles disappeared behind the miniature sandstorm.

“The Erzulie been watching!”

I turned and ran up the ramp. Everyone had their role—it was time for me to perform mine.

“The Erzulie been watching!”

The ground settled; the howling stopped. I reached the gaping hole that led deep into the plantation prison, then peeked behind me.

A pile of white flowers lay on the ground where Patty Roller and Twennymiles had stood. On top of it, mussed and disheveled, rested a silver wig. I grinned, then plunged into the darkness as the battle once again erupted behind me.

# 31
# SHE DON'T MISS

**THE HALLS OF OLD ANGOLA WANTED TO EAT ME**.

I'm not joking. They told me themselves. Now, I know what you're thinking—I'd been under a lot of stress, maybe I was hearing things, maybe I bumped my head and was still out on the beach somewhere. But trust me.

*"Another one, another one, into the dark they must come."* See?

And the voice came from everywhere, as if there were speakers in the slimy walls. The floor rose and fell as I walked through the shadows. I tried not to think about how it felt like I was inside a living creature. Something that breathed. Something that didn't want me poking around inside it.

Doors appeared, followed me down the halls, and then disappeared when I turned to look at them. Shadows rippled along the floor. And what's worse, corridors appeared where at first there'd been only walls. It was like a maze that rearranged itself as soon as you blinked.

*"Eat it, grind it, make us grow, make us grow."*

I tried to ignore the hissing whispers and kept moving. One foot in front of the other. Although I didn't know where I was supposed to go. If I was being honest with myself, I actually hadn't thought I'd make it this far. But

now I needed to figure out how to stop Old Angola and to cut off the power it was funneling to Cotton.

But how do you stop a monster that is also a building?

I continued walking. The walls trembled again. Somewhere ahead in the distance, the sound of brick grinding against brick echoed, and a cloud of dust shot out of a corridor that suddenly appeared a few feet in front of me. I jumped back, but when nothing snarling or slimy sprung out at me, I peeked inside.

*"Bring them, drain them, make me grow, make me grow."*

I clenched my jaw. "You're not scaring me," I called into the night, even though that's exactly what Old Angola was doing. I just refused to admit it. "I'm going to shut you down if it's the last thing I do."

I really, *really* hoped it wouldn't be the last thing I ever did.

*CLANG!*

A door slammed shut behind me, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I whirled around, fists raised, but no one was there. Instead, the cement brick walls began to re-form and reshape themselves, and the door slid backward into the dark. I gulped. This was getting creepy.

*"Where is it?"*

I turned. The whisper had come from the newly spawned corridor. I was doing my best to ignore the words now, as I was sure Old Angola wanted nothing more than for me to spend all my energy fretting over ghostly threats and to waste away while getting completely lost. No, I had to focus.

*"Where is it?"*

But there was something about that whisper. Something familiar.

*No, ignore it*, I told myself. *It's another trap*. I passed the corridor, determined to keep moving. Outside, my friends were fighting for their lives. For the lives of the city, the country, the world—*two* worlds! Alke lived inside the hearts of the children. If we didn't win this battle, I would've failed twice.

*"Take it, break it, build up our bones."*

*"Where is it?"*

I froze. There were two distinct whispers. Two different voices. The first was the prison plantation. I could hear the hunger in its words—the desire to consume, to devour, to destroy the strength, will, and spirit of those who were imprisoned inside. I sensed its need to grow, to use that which it had stolen to get even larger, hungrier, and more evil.

But the second whisper… It was different.

Smaller.

Desperate.

Despite every alarm bell that rang inside my head, I turned and walked down that new corridor.

*“Where is it?”*

I knew that voice. I’d heard it saying those exact words, in fact. It had happened a month earlier, though it felt like a year, after everything we’d been through. If not for that voice I wouldn’t be here, wouldn’t have traveled to Alke…

… wouldn’t have met the gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines. Wouldn’t have met Junior or Thandiwe. Wouldn’t have met Ayanna.

The corridor ended at a wide central atrium-like space with no ceiling, just a weird tree trunk growing from a pit in the middle. The tree was giving off a purple light that speckled the walls and doors. From here I could see hundreds of doors—on this level, on the level above that, and above that, on and on up into the sky. Too many to count.

*“Where is it?”*

It sounded like the whisper had come from the base of the tree. I stepped out of the corridor into the purple light… only to stumble backward as the trunk split into about twenty different sections.

“Sweet peaches,” I muttered.

That wasn’t a tree.

It was a giant cluster of haintacles.

As I watched, one of the wriggling appendages curled downward, wiped the floor of the pit, and then reached up to the top of the atrium. I edged closer and squinted. The group of haintacles lifted cement cinder blocks, plastered them against the inner walls, and returned for more. They were building Old Angola from the inside!

*“Where is it?”*

I swallowed, slowly moving toward the pit, already knowing what I was going to see, even as another haintacle appeared to swipe something from the floor. It made sense, actually, now that I knew what it was. What better way to build a spirit prison than with the stickiest adhesive known to humankind?

I sat down on the edge of the pit, pulled my backpack off my shoulders, and cradled it in my lap. The doll inside didn’t move. Couldn’t move. Not

without the energy that had been stripped from her, the spirit that had been stolen by the Breakers and delivered to Old Angola.

The tiny spirit that I now saw walking in circles around the pit.

“Hey, Gum Baby,” I whispered.

Funny how, when the time to speak had passed, there was so much I wanted to say.

Gum Baby’s spirit trudged around the cluster of haintacles. She disappeared from view, then returned, a constant confused and dejected expression on her face. Translucent sap dropped behind her as she walked —even as a ghost she was sticky. Seeing her like this, all sad and defeated, felt wrong.

A haintacle descended and swabbed the floor behind Gum Baby. With the ghost sap smeared on it, the snakelike arm lifted itself toward the highest row of cinder blocks. Something snapped inside me. How dare they use her like that?

“Hey!” I shouted, sliding off the edge to land in the pit. I ran up to the haintacle cluster and kicked one of them. “HEY!”

But they ignored me. Maybe one heartbroken boy wasn’t tempting enough to distract them from building a haunted plantation prison. I kicked the haintacle one more time, but in my anger I only clipped it with my heel. I lost my balance and tumbled. Gum Baby’s wooden body fell out of my hands and skidded away. I slammed my fist into the floor. Then did it again. It was all so unfair! How could terrible things continue to happen to decent people?

I didn’t realize I was still pounding the floor until my knuckles began to ache. A deep, noiseless sob shuddered through me, and I just wanted to lie there and never get up. What was the point?

The spirit of Gum Baby trudged around the pit again. She passed by her body without giving it a second glance. Spirit sap fell onto it, and I saw one of the haintacles begin to descend out the corner of my eye. Panic filled me. What if it took the wooden doll with it when it came to collect more sap? I scrambled to my feet and ran across the pit, snatching up the doll just as the giant evil appendage rumbled by.

Something crinkled inside Gum Baby’s clothes.

I frowned. That was weird. I looked around, then backed into a small depression in the wall of the pit and crouched down to investigate. After a

few seconds of searching the miniature black turtleneck and pants, I found the issue. A wadded-up collection of tiny papers had been stuffed inside the cuff of her right pant leg. I pulled them out and read the title aloud.

"'The True Life Story of Gum Baby the Great.'" A grin crossed my face as I read the subtitle. "'Not to Be Read by Any Bumbletongues.'"

"'Seriously, this means you, Tristan.'"

"'Last warning, Tristan!!! Do not read!!!'"

I looked down at the doll in my lap and shook my head. The rest of the pages were blank—she'd never gotten around to writing her story. I smiled, then folded the papers and leaned my head back against the pit wall. Maybe she'd never gotten around to it, but that didn't mean I couldn't tell my own version of the story right now.

I cleared my throat. "Gum Baby the Great was the *strongest* hero across two worlds. She led an Anansesem to a realm that needed him, and rescued that realm from the evil threat he brought into it. She fought for her friends, never gave up, and never complained about it." I thought for a second, then added clarification. "She didn't complain *too much*. But she just wanted to go on adventures, and she deserved her flowers."

Something about her sap attack needed to come next. I opened my mouth, then paused.

The spirit of Gum Baby had stopped walking… and was looking at me. No, not at me—at the doll in my lap.

I stood up and licked my lips. "Can… can you hear me?"

The spirit didn't say anything. I sighed. It had been worth a shot. Maybe this was what happened sometimes. I slumped back against the wall and lifted one of Gum Baby's wooden hands.

"Gum Baby's sap attack was the most…" My voice trailed off.

The spirit had raised her hand as well. Was she reacting to the story? Maybe she *could* hear me.

"Her sap attack," I continued, "was the most powerful weapon in all the land. Pinpoint accuracy. Incredible power. It defeated a vicious haint and toppled iron monsters." As I told the story of Gum Baby, I held up the wooden doll in my lap, raising both arms and making it move about like a puppet. The spirit mimicked every movement. Mirrored it. As if… as if there was still a connection.

*Gods can't die, not if their stories continued to be told.*

But Gum Baby wasn't a god, right?

Right?

"Her legend spread throughout Alke, from MidPass to the Golden Crescent. From Nyanza to Isihlangu. Her reputation as a hero grew, and soon 'The Ballad of the Gummy' was sung by children and adults all over." The spirit moved closer and closer to me. Telling her story was reuniting the spirit with the doll! I held my breath. She stopped a foot away. So close! But the cluster of haintacles rumbled, and one curled down to collect more sap. It began to return to the ever-expanding upper floors of Old Angola, but then it paused. It returned to wipe the floor of the pit. Then it rose and slowly slithered around the space, as if looking for something.

"Oh no," I whispered, looking at the Gum Baby ghost. While she was standing and listening to a story, she wasn't creating a trail of spirit sap. And no spirit sap meant an angry plantation prison. I had to hurry up…. If this was going to work, there was only one thing to do.

"The things I do for friendship," I muttered. Then I began to sing.

*"The ballad of the gummy, ballad of the gummy.*
*Strongest and the fiercest, and her nose is never runny.*
*Sap attack, back it back, the hero of the hour.*
*Riding on her bumbly steed, who needs to take a shower."*

The haintacle wriggled closer. Any second now and we'd be caught. The spirit of Gum Baby stood over her body, a curious expression on her face. Like she was trying to remember.

*WHAM!*

But we were out of time. The haintacle crashed into a wall, its tip pointed right at Gum Baby. It shot forward, poised to drag her back to her circuit and force her to give up her sap. Old Angola would grow forever. And my friend would be gone forever.

"No," I said. *"No!"*

I stepped over Gum Baby and stood between her and the haintacle. My fists clenched, and I didn't need to look to know that the akofena shadow gloves had roared to life beside me. The black flames rippled in the purple light of the pit. I wasn't sure what my plan was, but I refused to let Old Angola win. Even if it meant I'd be smashed into a pancake, I would stand my ground.

The haintacle shot forward like a battering ram. If I dodged, Gum Baby was a goner. If I ducked, slipped, bobbed, or weaved, Gum Baby was a

goner. I had to stand. Stand strong. With my arms crossed in front of me, the gloves forming a blazing wall of black fire.

*Stand strong.*

*Stand strong.*

*Stand—*

*FWOOM!*

The haintacle slammed into the shadow gloves. The impact lifted me off my feet and bashed me against the pit wall, and I slid down in a haze of pain. But through my blurry vision, I saw a black flame leap onto the evil tendril and race along it to the trunk cluster. The haintacle thrashed about, and I groaned and tried to crawl out of the way. But it must've seen me, because it turned toward me. It shivered as if screaming a silent challenge and shot forward once more.

I tried to move, but it felt as if my lungs were filled with mud. I couldn't breathe! A steel band squeezed my ribs, and my movements were so sluggish. The haintacle, sensing weakness, lifted itself into the air for one last whip. A sob escaped my lips. This was it. For me, for Chicago, and for my friends. This was—

*WHAP! WHAP! WHAP!*

A trio of curiously sticky projectiles smacked the leading tip of the haintacle. The fire already covering the monstrous appendage flared high into the air. The haintacle squealed (squealed!) and changed directions before smashing into the wall of the pit and sticking there.

"Gum Baby's gotta do everything around here!"

I turned to see the tiny doll staggering on her feet, one hand on the pit wall as she pointed at the burning haintacle.

"Don't come looking for the sap, 'cause the sap don't miss!" she told it. Then she turned to me and flipped back a braid that had fallen across her face. "You sing like a toad!"

After that, she collapsed.

# 32
# THE GUM BUDDIES

**BUT WE WEREN'T OUT OF THE WOODS YET**.

"Stop babying Gum Baby!"

I carried the resurrected tiny doll in my backpack, which I wore slung in reverse so it was on my chest. Gum Baby peeked out of the zippered opening of the main pouch. She was complaining because I wouldn't let her ride in my hoodie.

"Hush," I said, not paying her much attention. More haintacles were starting to take an interest in what was happening in the pit, and I didn't want to get trapped in there. Hand over hand, I climbed the short wall, then pulled myself over the edge and scrambled toward the exit. I hoped it was the same corridor I'd entered from.

"Did you just shush—"

"No," I said, cutting her off. "I *hushed* you. Big difference. Actually kind of polite."

"Oh." Gum Baby thought for a second. "Well, anyway. Listen… Gum Baby's just gonna say it…. She came back to life just to save you."

I didn't answer. I had other things on my mind, like making sure we didn't die.

She shifted around in the backpack so that she faced me, and she had a curious expression on her face. I was used to her scowling at me. This was more like…affection?

That was it. We were definitely going to die. “And you sang ‘The Ballad of the Gummy.’” “And?”

“Gum Baby knows it was a bit off-key, and you can’t stay on rhythm to save your life, but you still sang it to save Gum Baby. That’s…”

She paused.

I peeked down into the jagged rubble the haintacles protruded from. I couldn’t see anything but darkness and their treelike cluster. No evil engine, or diabolical flywheel, or even an acid reflux capacitor. And, to make matters worse, I’d forgotten which tunnel led to the front entrance. I should’ve marked it somehow.

*SLAM!*

I groaned. And *now* I heard doors slamming and the haunted shrieks of Breakers echoing down the tunnel. Make that multiple tunnels—at least two, if not three.

*Great,* I thought*. Just what we need*. We were out of time, and I was no closer to stopping Old Angola than when I first walked in.

“Well,” Gum Baby was saying, “normally Gum Baby doesn’t do this, but she has no choice. You saved her life, and she’s saved yours (more times than she can count, to be honest), and that can mean only one thing.”

“Mmhmm,” I said, searching for a hiding space. Maybe if I stood still the Breakers wouldn’t see me.

“Gum Baby and Tristan…”

“Yep,” I said, holding my hands above my head and wiggling my fingers. I was a haintacle now. Trying to blend in. Not paying attention to the approaching shrieks, or the slinking shadows gathering around the pit. None of that mattered, because I was supposed to be here.

“We’re Gum Buddies. Now we can be roommates.” Wait a minute.

“What?” I asked, finally paying attention.

Gum Baby was rummaging around in the backpack headfirst, her tiny legs waving in the air. I tapped one of them, then flicked the resulting sap away. “Excuse me, what do you mean, *roommates*?”

“That’s what Gum Buddies are!” Gum Baby’s voice echoed with excitement, and she emerged from the pack with a scrap of paper and a pencil left over from school. “Roommates till the bitter end. Of course, Gum Baby needs her space, so you better not be messy or snore or take up too much room in the closet, which is where you’ll have to sleep…. Better yet, Gum Baby will bring her costume trunk, and—”

*SMASH!*

“Oh, thank goodness,” I said, and sighed with relief. One of the steel doors had flown out of a dark tunnel entrance and slammed into the pit floor. A couple Breakers I could deal with. Better than contemplating life with Gum Baby as a roommate.

Except it wasn’t just a couple.

Breakers poured out of the tunnels like bees protecting their hive. Evil, spirit-stealing bees. They ran along the circular walls, the floor, and even the scorched haintacle. We were surrounded. It was Patty Roller’s Wig Emporium all over again.

A giant Breaker leaped down in front of us. Its knuckles scraped the ground and its wide mouth stretched open. Whip-claws unfurled.

I tensed. This couldn’t happen again. Gum Baby was on alert in the backpack in front of me. But I couldn’t see her get hurt. Not for a second time.

The Breaker flexed, dropped into a crouch, and let out a scream.

So what did I do? I screamed right back at it. It wanted me to be terrified? Fine. But it could have my anger as well. And Gum Baby screamed right along with me. It was just like the barge tow in New Orleans, except this time I didn’t care if we burned everything down around us. In fact, I hoped we did.

The Breaker leaped forward.

Once again, I took a step back. But it wasn’t out of fear. No, it was to anchor myself. Pull strength up from my legs, into my center, and through my arms, which moved in front of me automatically in a cross-body block. The akofena shadow gloves emerged like firecrackers made of the night sky, and the shield of fire returned once more.

The Breaker’s whip claws snapped forward.

“Sap attack!” Gum Baby screamed, and hurled sap at it.

And then a funny thing happened. As the sap flew through the flaming wall, it ignited, bursting into silver flame as it pelted the Breaker right in the

chest.

You know what's terrifying? Flaming sap.

The Breaker tumbled to the floor, scrabbling for footing as the silver flames engulfed it. And just like back on the barge, everything the fire touched began to burn.

Gum Baby and I looked at each other.

"Sap dap?" she asked hopefully.

I nodded. "Sap dap."

"Wooooo!" she shouted in excitement as she pointed to the Breakers crowding in all around us. "You butterbeans ain't seen nothing yet! Just wait until the Gum Buddies sap-dap you thistle-heads. You'll be wishing you never heard of us. C'mon, dunderbuns, don't get the shiver knees now!"

Gum Baby's hands were a blur as she skipped sap balls off of my gloves. They flew through the fire, ignited, and landed on her targets. Breaker after Breaker went up in flames, and when the shadow monsters careened off walls and each other, they only made the inferno worse. The pit burned, the haintacles burned, and debris that fell from the walls burned as well. Old Angola was being destroyed from the inside out. We'd done it! And all it had taken was me and a friend.

A friend?

I sighed.

A Gum Buddy.

The Breakers that weren't burning fled down a large tunnel off to my left. That had to be the exit. A section of the haintacle tree trunk crashed down into the pit, throwing sparks everywhere. It was time to make our escape.

"We're leaving, Gum Baby!" I shouted.

She flexed, then pointed after the Breakers. "Cavalry pursuit, bumble-steed."

I glared at her.

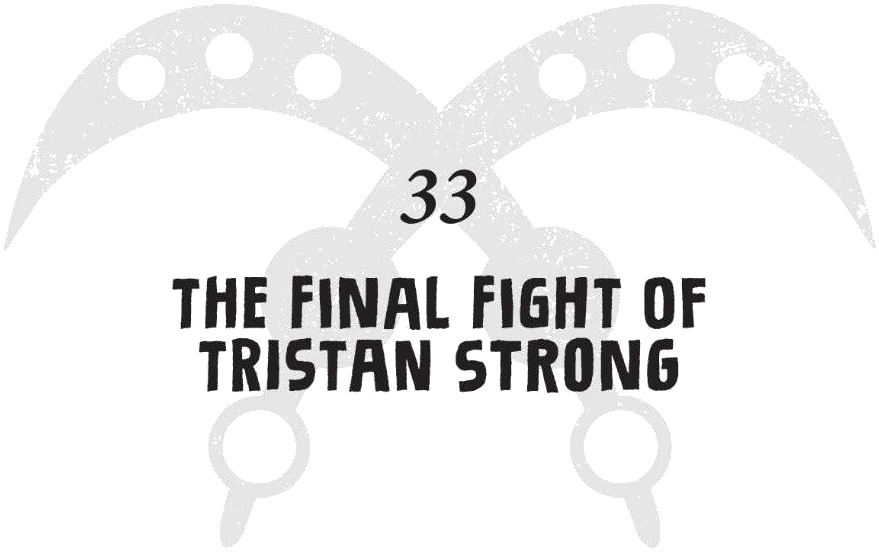
"Gum Baby was just joking, jeez."

I raced into the tunnel. Every muscle in my body ached, and it was all I could do to stay on my feet as the prison collapsed around me. At some point the shadow gloves had disappeared. I was exhausted, and whatever powers of Alke I had left were on the verge of petering out, like a candle

trapped under a glass. But I could just make out the large entrance ahead of me, and the drawbridge, and it was only a few more steps before…

Pain exploded in my chest. Something knocked me off my feet, sending me spinning to the ground. I felt rather than saw Gum Baby fly out of the half-zipped backpack, tumbling down onto the beach.

And everything went black.



# 33

# THE FINAL FIGHT OF TRISTAN STRONG

**DARKNESS. RUMBLING**.

Then: “You ain’t worth the dirt you’re lying on.”

Lights. Two of them, like twin candles burning. Or was something on fire? No.

Eyes.

The voice spoke again. “How could you do this to me? You ruined everything!”

A face slowly emerged to contain those burning eyes. I knew that face. Harsh and twisted. Thorns and sharp teeth. Cotton. For a second, I actually welcomed him. It meant I was still alive.

Or did it mean I was dead and those burning eyes would follow me forever?

“Here I thought we had an understanding. Clarity, in a sense, about how the world works.” Cotton lunged out of the dark until his face was inches from mine. He grabbed both of my cheeks with stained fingers that tapered into claws. “They were gonna make me king!”

I jerked away from his grip. “You’re no one’s king,” I wheezed.

Light cracked through the darkness, and the rumbling grew louder. We were inside Old Angola, I realized. It was falling apart and we were still

inside. Why? How come Cotton didn't drag me outside in front of everyone? The haint was a showman. He'd never pass up an opportunity to make a display of strength.

Unless… he'd lost his strength.

The haintacles were burning, as was Old Angola. The Breakers had fled.

"You're alone," I said, interrupting whatever monologue he'd been in the middle of performing.

"What did you say?"

I shook my head and laughed. "You're alone. Just like when we met, a haint from a broken jar."

He growled and then shoved me away. I was on the ground and sore. My body felt like one large bruise. But I refused to just lie there. As much as it hurt, I struggled to my feet, wobbling and dizzy, yes, but still standing.

More cracks of light webbed across the darkness, and bits of concrete began to fall to the floor. A piece about the size of my head dislodged from right above us and hurtled down. I winced as it smashed to pieces only a yard away. Light stabbed in, revealing a sky smudged with purple and pink. The shadows faded and I finally got a good look at Cotton.

I wish I hadn't.

The empty husks of several haintacles dangled off him, like old, starving leeches. Gone was the fancy shirt and hat, and his pants were stained and tattered. But his eyes still burned with hatred, no longer masked by the costume of a gentleman, like the one he'd worn back in the French Quarter in New Orleans. Now he looked like the haint he was and nothing more. Evil with no filter applied.

"You've ruined everything," he said again with a snarl. "Everything! But I can start over. Find more spirits, gather more power. You'll see. This world has tons of potential. Pockets of hidden stories tucked everywhere, just marinating, waitin' on someone like me to suck the marrow out the bone."

"Give up," I said, my breath rattling in my lungs. "Everyone's seen you for what you are. No way you'd get away with it again."

Cotton threw back his head and laughed. "Boy, you's a twice-born fool. There's always gonna be a Cotton. Always gonna be a need for power. You think I begged them other folks to help me out? To block your progress? Shoot, boy, they were here before me! People always gonna need someone

like me to make them look less greedy. So sit tight, I'm gonna re-up and be back in business tomorrow, you'll see."

No. That couldn't be right, could it?

But I remembered the voices of the spirits fleeing the riots. The stories buried under cities. The violence and destruction hidden beneath the streets and parks. Cotton hadn't done any of that. He hadn't created those stories— he'd just tried to use their power. And if he had his way, he'd continue to devour the past, so no one would ever learn it. People like the Redliners could hide behind their masks and their sanitized versions of history. And creatures like Patty Roller would continue to hunt down children like me and stamp every bit of magic out of them.

No, Cotton hadn't started all this. But I could make sure he didn't take it any farther.

I pulled myself upright, forcing my chin to lift defiantly, and glared at Cotton. When I was sure my voice wouldn't give out on me, I stared straight into his burning eyes and shook my head. "There is no tomorrow for you."

The haint paused. "And who's gonna stop me? You?" He barked out a laugh. "Boy, the only thing holding you up is the breeze."

I limped to the entrance, even as Old Angola shuddered and dust rained down, and shook my head again. "No. This is where it ends."

Cotton's smile faded. "I will flay the spirit from your skin, boy, if you don't get outta my way. I got bigger morsels to chew out there, and you ain't worth the energy."

He took a step forward, and I willed the shadow gloves into existence. They appeared, faint and barely burning, but still, they appeared, and I could've sobbed with relief. I wasn't sure they would.

"Move," Cotton hissed.

I stood straighter and tried not to wince. "No."

"Fine," the haint snarled. "Say good-bye, Tristan Strong."

And as the rest of Old Angola cracked and crumbled around us, revealing the sun-kissed surface of Lake Michigan and the resilient skyline of Chicago, and the gods and Alkeans on the lakefront called out my name, and the community lining the trees held up their smartphones to record, I put up my two fists and prepared to do what I did best, what Strongs did best, what my people had done for centuries when backed into a corner with

no way out except the rocky path filled with the obstacles hurled in their way.

One last round in a fight to save me, save my friends, and save the world.

I punched.

Fighting Cotton was nothing like boxing in my first match, or sparring with Reggie Janson, or any of the other matches and practices I'd participated in. It was rough. Dirty, even. There wasn't a ring, just a small clear space amid the rubble of a haunted plantation prison.

And I was losing.

Cotton swiped left and right so fast I couldn't follow his movements. But the pain let me know where his hits came down.

"You done messed up now," he taunted after one of his attacks sent me stumbling backward. "I'm gonna make you famous. Your memorial service will be the talk of the town."

I threw a jab-straight combo. Neither my fists nor the shadow gloves landed, but it forced Cotton to retreat a few steps. That's what I had to do. Keep punching.

"Is that all you got?" The haint laughed. "Boy, you slower than a slug in molasses." He danced around me and clawed at my face. I jerked back but in doing so stumbled over a large stone and fell.

Cotton laughed. "Stay down, boy, before this pile of stones becomes your grave marker. Better folks than you have tried and failed to dethrone the king."

I panted, every inch of my body tired and in pain. I was stressed and suffering. But if I moved one leg forward, put both hands on my knee, and ignored the screaming pain, I could shove myself to my feet. And my arms could lift, and my fists could clench. If I did that, I could keep punching.

Just had to keep punching.

Cotton snarled as I climbed to my feet. "You don't get it, do you? You lost! Give up already."

I inhaled, then let a sigh, or maybe a hiss of pain, escape through my teeth. I shook my head. "No."

The haint howled with rage and attacked. Blow after blow. Punching, kicking, swiping. The akofena shadow gloves flickered as I tried to weather the storm.

*Just keep punching.*

My jabs were feeble. My straights were worse. I couldn't manage a hook, and an uppercut was out of the question.

*Just keep punching.*

Cotton was a whirlwind of hatred and aggression, but I noticed his movements were beginning to slow. His attacks came further and further apart. His chest, still covered in the withered remains of haintacles, heaved up and down.

*Just keep punching.*

Finally, Cotton staggered back. His hands were down at his sides, and he sucked in oxygen like a vacuum cleaner with a leaky hose.

"Why… won't you… give up?" he asked, his snarl more of a whine.

I lifted my fists, ignoring the stinging pain in my arms. Ignored the stitch in my side, the sprain in my ankle. I ignored it all and approached him a step at a time. I had enough energy for one last shot. After that, it was beyond me.

"Keep punching," I said.

"What?"

"We. Keep. Punching."

Cotton swung at me, but I batted it aside. I didn't attack, not yet. He'd tired himself out. He wasn't built to last, not like Walter Strong, not like Nana Strong, not like my family, my community, my people.

"Who?" he asked, and for the first time a trickle of fear slipped through the haint's bravado.

I grinned. Pointed at my heart. Lifted my chin high, and spread my arms wide. "Strongs. Strongs keep punching."

My fists weren't in a guard position, and Cotton saw that. He snarled and lunged forward, throwing his all into an attack that would rip me to shreds.

And I was waiting for it.

*Step to the side.*

Cotton's momentum carried him past me, and he was off-balance.

*Counterpunch.*

My right fist, my power fist, knifed through the air and connected flush against Cotton's chin. Just my fist, not the shadow gloves, because I needed them for what came next.

*The world is going to hit you hard, son. Clinch and don't let go until you can keep on fighting.*

And so I clinched.

Now the gloves winked into existence. The black flames flared to life one more time, with as much energy as I could muster flowing through them. Just as I'd done on the barge, I willed the gloves together, merging six into two shining beacons of black in the light of the setting sun. The fire crept up my arms. The flames wreathed my shoulders, united behind my back, and surged high in the air. For a brief moment, I burned like a black star.

I darted forward and grabbed Cotton.

"What are you doing?" he snarled.

I didn't answer. He twisted, turned, fought, and struggled, but I didn't let go. It was weird, but under the thorns and the snarls, it was like he was barely there. The flames of the akofena spread to him, devouring the thorns and cotton as if they hungered for the hatred binding the haint together.

"Stop! You can't do this! What is

happening?" The flames crackled.

"Do you know who I am?" Cotton screamed, his voice a distorted howl. "I'm King Cotton! King! Cotton! You can't get rid of me, Tristan Strong!"

The flames roared.

"Tristan Strong!"

The haint's voice echoed across the beach, floating over the water. A piece of cotton dropped to the lake as the shout faded away. Just before it reached the surface, a wisp of smoke curled up and it burst into black flames, and the last essence of the haint King Cotton left forever.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

# EPILOGUE

***"It's been one month since the Oakwood Beach Incident,*** *and city officials are still at a loss as to how to explain the strange events. The mayor has promised a full investigation and has appointed a task force to lead the charge into unraveling the mystery. And now we turn to a special report: Doctors across Chicago are reporting strange symptoms in the children of the city. Is it really magic, or something else?"*

"Tristan?"

I exited the news video on the SBP. For a few seconds I just stared at the screen. Nyame had given the phone back to me a few days after the battle of Lake Michigan. "Anansi may not be inside," he'd said, "but the Story Box belongs with the Anansesem."

"So… I'm still an Anansesem? I haven't been stripped of the title?"

The sky god had snorted and tousled my hair. "No one has seen the stories of the people like you have, Tristan. It would be foolish to deny them your talents. And besides…" He'd slipped his sunglasses back on and turned to leave. "Since when have I ever done as Anansi demanded? He's lucky I even released him."

I'd learned that Anansi had convinced Nyame and the other gods to free him from the SBP, both to get reinforcements for the battle with Cotton and

to contribute to the fight himself. I'd miss having him at my disposal…. Maybe. I was still wrestling with it.

"Have you seen him?" I'd asked, clutching the SBP to my chest. It felt… right, having it back. But no one had seen Anansi since the end of the battle, not even Junior. It was a little unsettling, knowing that the trickster god was out in the world, which had been his desire from the very beginning. But Nyame had shaken his head, then gone back to helping John Henry and the other gods clean up the remains of Old Angola (Lake Michigan must've risen several feet from all the cinder-block rubble that had fallen into it).

Eventually, the gods had departed together. Nyame had managed to acquire a giant tour bus, and he planned on giving the other gods a tour of the country while they tracked down more lost Alkeans. He said they'd keep a low profile, but when I saw a picture of the giant golden bus with SKYGOD as the license plate, I knew otherwise.

"Tristan!"

The shout dragged me from my memories, and when the time flashed on the SBP's home screen, my eyes grew wide. I was going to be late! I ignored the triple-digit red number in the lower corner of the Diaspor-app, tumbled off my bed, grabbed my backpack, and threw on a hoodie. School started in an hour, and it would take me forty-five minutes to get there.

"Tristan Strong?" Dad's voice echoed through the apartment.

I dashed into the kitchen, grabbed a bagel and an orange, then hugged Dad and kissed Mom on the cheek. Dad eyed me, checked his watch, and raised an eyebrow.

"I know," I said around a mouthful of bagel. "Leaving now."

He snorted and went back to reading. "Don't think that just because you're getting a ride now you can slack off. If those grades drop, you'll be back on the bus, hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" I tiptoed behind him and snapped off a jab. Before my hand got anywhere close to him, Dad, with his flexibility magic, had somehow snagged my punch out of midair.

"Good-bye, Tristan," he said, and I rolled my eyes. Mom winked at me and I waved, then jogged out the door.

At the curb in front, a black SUV with a crow on the hood honked/cawed. I dodged a mom and her kid drawing chalk sight words on the sidewalk and hopped into the back seat, tossing my bag into the trunk.

“How come I never get to ride shotgun?” I complained as I started to peel the orange.

Junior peeked back at me and held out a hand. I sighed and gave him a couple wedges, and he turned around happily. “Easy—you’re always late. Can’t call shotgun if you’re not here when the seats are assigned.”

Something scrabbled around in the back, and then a tiny face looked over the back seat. “Gum Baby is sick and tired of riding in the trunk! Is that how you treat your Gum Buddy? Got sap on the windows *one time*, and now Gum Baby’s being sappressed. Y’all are mean.”

Okay, so hear me out. Yes, Gum Baby and I are roommates. But honestly, where else was she going to go? Not many hotels renting out rooms to a ten-inch sap-covered doll.

But instead of answering her, I held up the SBP screen. Her eyes lit up at the number of Diaspor-app notifications. “More kids with Alkean magic?”

I nodded. “A lot.”

“Gum Baby will send out the standard message. Here’s how magic works, what Alke was, and what the goal is. Gum Baby really needs to get paid for this, though—her labor ain’t free.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, I’ll get you some more espresso. But you really need to cut back.”

“Gum Baby needs caffeeeine,” she howled as her fingers began blazing across the screen.

Thandiwe looked back from the driver’s seat. “Can we go now? Or do you want to debate some more and make us late? Again.”

A hand reached out from the seat next to me and rested on my arm. Ayanna smiled and I smiled back, glad that she wasn’t alternating between shaking me and hugging me like she had when I’d stumbled onto the beach after fighting King Cotton. She hadn’t said anything then, just sobbed and laughed at the same time, and I understood. I really did.

And if our hug had lasted a bit longer than normal, so what?

And if I’d thought that her face had lit up the evening sky and not the other way around, and that the image would stay with me until my dying day, what of it?

And if I didn’t really understand or couldn’t express what that feeling was, only that I wanted her to help me figure it out, don’t even stress.

That’s not a part of this story.

“Yeah,” I said now. “Let’s go.”

The princess looked the oldest of all of us, and we needed someone to pretend to drive Old Familiar as we went to school. Self-driving cars were cool and all, but they tended to attract unwanted attention.

Oh, you didn’t know? Turns out I had some new classmates going into the eighth grade with me. It wasn’t like Junior, Thandiwe, and Ayanna had anywhere else to go, so Mami Wata had pulled some strings to enroll them, and Granny Z had called in a few favors to get them an apartment down the street in Bronzeville, and the next thing I knew, we were coming up with plans to form an Alke after-school club. Everyone was welcome, of course. Except for haints.

And Gum Baby?

“Do you think Gum Baby can try out for the gymnastics team? She heard them talking about sticking the landing, and that’s what the Gummy does best, you know? She can work on her floor routine while y’all in school. Don’t look at Gum Baby like that, Bumbletongue! If Gum Baby can’t go to kindergarten, she might as well follow her lifelong dream she just thought of.”

Yeah. Gum Baby’s still Gum Baby.

We arrived at school just before the bell rang. We all had the same homeroom, and we made it to our seats in the nick of time. A few kids were whispering to each other and staring at the door. When I asked what was going on, one of them, an Afro-Latina who was new, too, shrugged. “Mr. Tyson quit. Something about an amazing opportunity in Delaware or something. The new teacher, Mr. Kwaku, isn’t here yet, but people are saying he’s…” She hesitated, and before she could finish, the door opened.

*Mr. Kwaku?*

“The bell has rung, students. I expect books open and mouths

closed.” My hand stilled. Wait… wait just a minute. I knew that voice. It couldn’t be…. But when I looked at Junior, his mouth had dropped open as well.

A shadow fell over my desk.

“Come now, Mr. Strong, I’ve heard about you. Quite the reputation you’ve got.” Two brown hands leaned on my desk, and I looked up to see the twinkling eyes of Anansi staring at me. He winked. “I think we’ll have a lot of fun in class this year.”

I gulped.

My name is Tristan Strong, and boy am I gonna have a story for you.

**Kwame Mbalia** is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*, for which he won the Coretta Scott King Author Honor award, *Tristan Strong Destroys the World*, and *Last Gate of the Emperor*. He lives with his wife and children near Raleigh, North Carolina, where he is currently working on a new series. Follow Kwame on Twitter @KSekouM.

**Rick Riordan**, dubbed “storyteller of the gods” by *Publishers Weekly*, is the author of five *New York Times* #1 best-selling series, including Percy Jackson and the Olympians, which brings Greek mythology to life for contemporary readers. His most recent book is *Daughter of the Deep*, a modern take on the Jules Verne classic *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The goal of his imprint, Rick Riordan Presents, is to publish highly entertaining books by authors from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to allow them to tell their own stories inspired by the mythology, folklore, and culture of their heritage. Rick’s Twitter handle is @RickRiordan.